



This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

- + *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.
- + *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.
- + *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.
- + *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

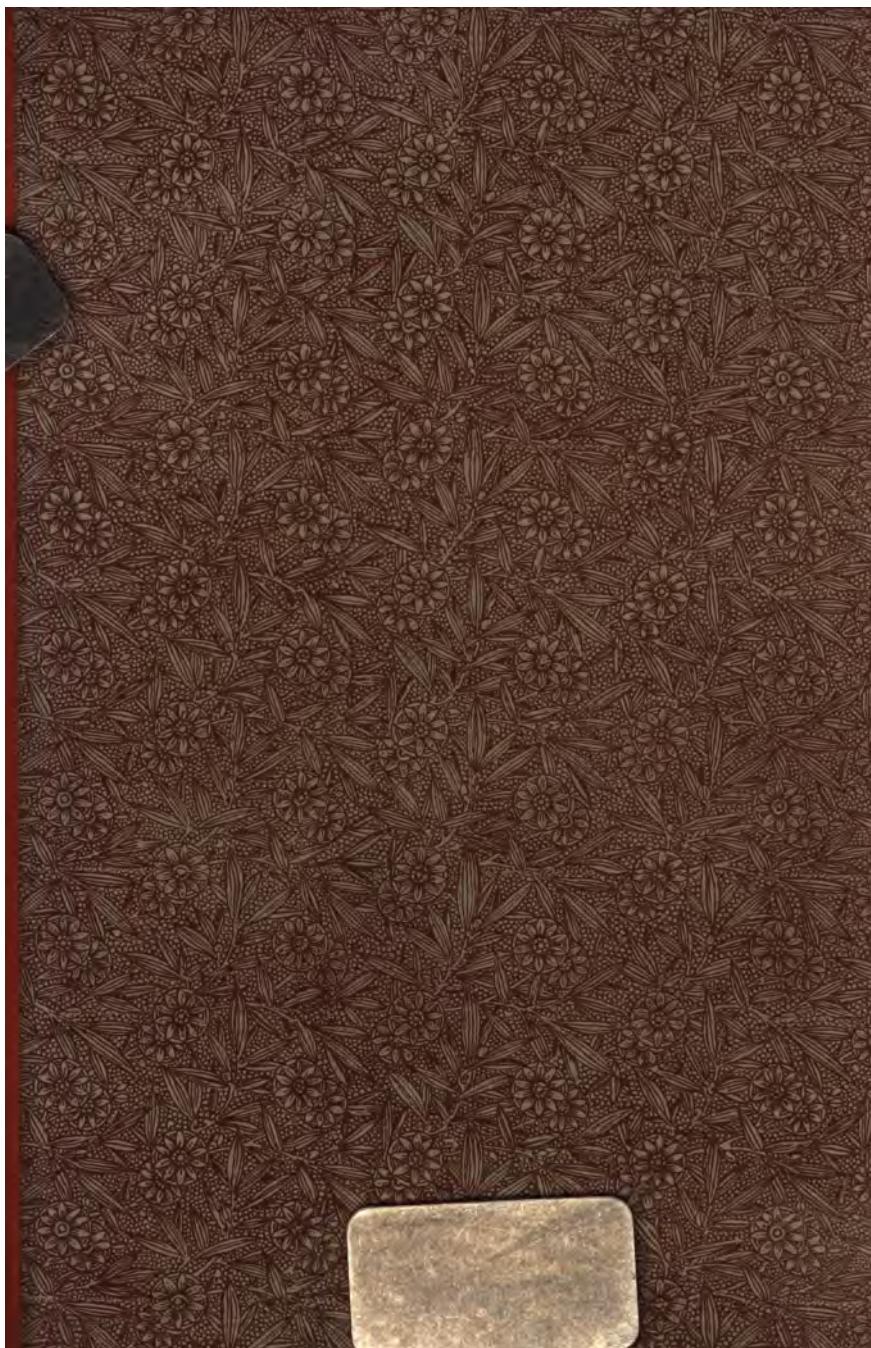
About Google Book Search

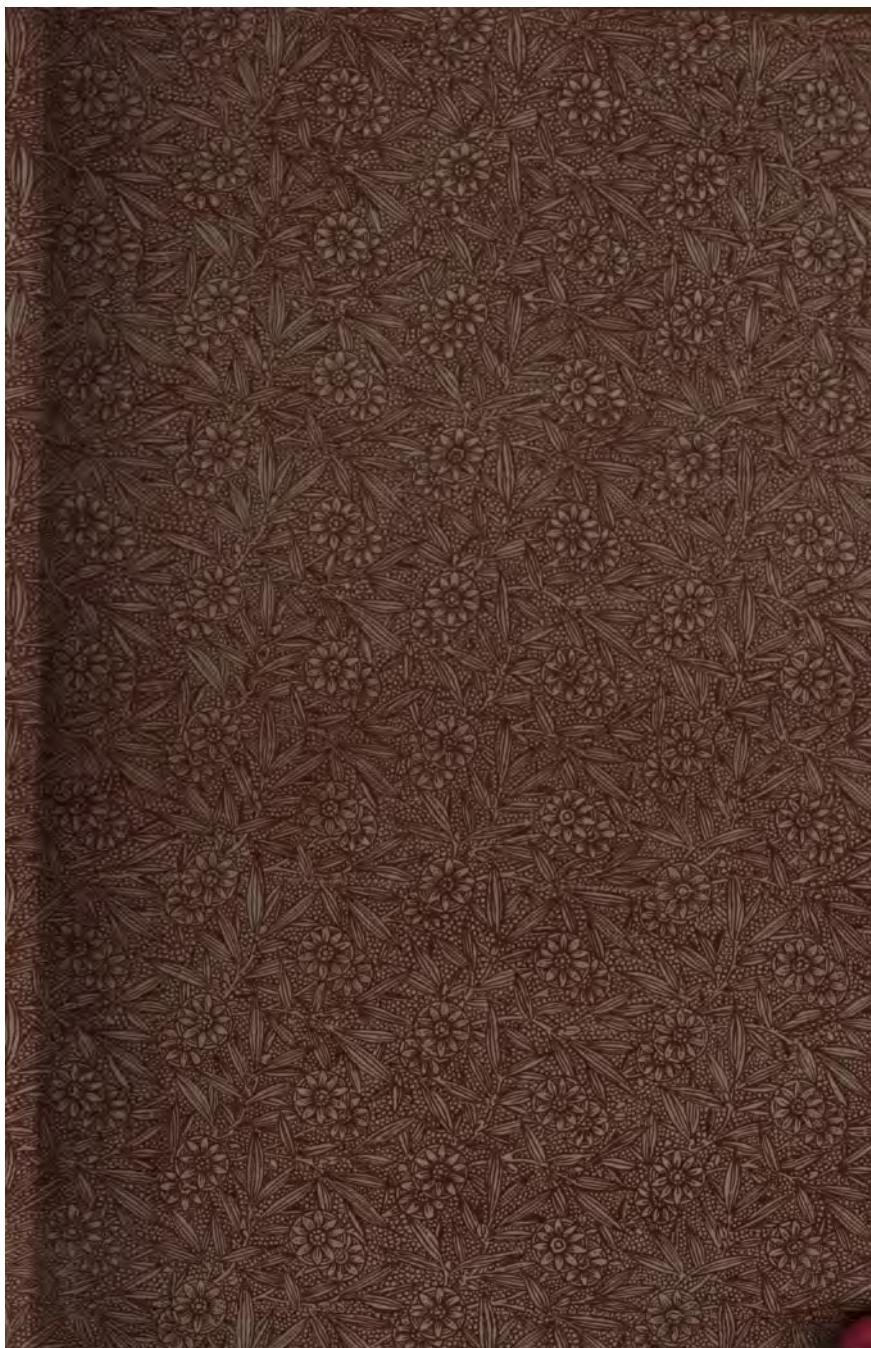
Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at <http://books.google.com/>



NOEL VANSTONE









600072650Q

NEW WORKS AT EVERY LIBRARY.

*THE LIFE AND LETTERS OF
BERLIOZ*, translated from the French by H.
MAINWARING DUNSTAN. 2 Vols., crown 8vo., 15/-.

RUSSIANS AND GERMANS, by
VICTOR TISSOT, translated by S. L. SIMEON.
1 Vol., demy, 12/6.

TEMPTED OF THE DEVIL, a
Novel, by the Author of "A Fallen Angel."
3 Vols., 31/6.

A ROYAL AMOUR, an Historical
Novel of the time of Charles II., by R. DAVEY.
2 Vols., 21/-.

FLATTERING TALES, a Volume of
Stories, by A. EG Mont HAKE, Author of "Paris
Originals." 1 Vol., 7/6.

REMINGTON & Co., 134, NEW BOND STREET, W.

OF ALL BOOKSELLERS.

NOEL VANSTONE.

A Novel.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

BY

MRS. FREDERICK WILTON.

VOL. I.



London:
REMINGTON AND CO.,
NEW BOND STREET, W.

1882.

[All Rights Reserved.]

251. i . 969





NOEL VANSTONE.

CHAPTER I.

“ **S**O you have come at last, Noel ! ”
“ Yes, uncle, I am very sorry I could not be here earlier ; I was in Derbyshire, staying with some friends of mine, and did not receive your letter until yesterday evening. I travelled as far as Birmingham last night, and came on by the first train this morning. I am very sorry to find you so ill, sir.” And Noel Vanstone, who was standing close by the big old-fashioned bedstead on which his uncle lay, gazed compassionately at the thin, sharp features and sunken eyes of the old

man, who, propped up with pillows, seemed to draw every breath with pain and difficulty.

“ Yes, yes, boy, I *am* ill, *very* ill, but you have not come too late to make me the promise, which will let me die in peace, or yet too late if you refuse what I wish, for me to make a fresh will, d’ye hear ? ”

“ What is it that you wish ? ”

“ Go and fetch Cora, bring her to my bedside, and promise that within a year of my death you will make her your wife. Do this, and I will leave everything I possess to you, Noel,” and the old man sank back exhausted with the momentary energy with which he had uttered the last few words.

Noel went closer to the side of the bed, and taking his uncle’s trembling hand gently in his own, said very softly, “ Uncle, I cannot tell you how it grieves me to be obliged to refuse any request of yours now, but I can-

not do what you wish—believe me, I do not care to have your money ; I sincerely hope that you will leave all to your niece Cora ; surely it would be far kinder to her to leave her free to choose who she will for a husband, than to force her to promise to marry a man whom she does not care for.”

“ Nurse ! ” called the old man, in a sharp, unnatural voice, which startled Noel, and brought the nurse at once from an adjoining room, with an alarmed look on her face ; but before she could say a word, the Squire gasped out, “ Tell Tom to ride over to Birk-over, and fetch Mr. Brandon at once ; d’ye hear, he is to come *at once*.”

The nurse glanced at Noel Vanstone with a look of dismay ; he was a great favourite with every one, high and low, at Fryersdale, and she knew well that Mr. Brandon was the Squire’s family lawyer, and that his sending

for him in anger immediately after his interview with his nephew, looked bad for that young gentleman's future prospects. She went at once, however, to do the Squire's bidding ; while Noel tried to soothe and calm his angry uncle, readjusting the pillows, and placing the old man carefully back on them with as gentle a hand and as deft a touch as a woman.

“ There, there, you are a good fellow, Noel, your mother was fortunate to have so good a son to nurse her in her last illness, but you might give in to an old man's whims. Corrie is not such a bad lass, for all she has a bit of a temper, and I should like to know she would have a good husband, and be well cared for when I am gone. Her mother was my favourite sister, and I promised her to do what I could for the girl.”

“ Uncle, you may be sure that, as her

cousin and friend, I shall always be willing to do all in my power for Cora, but I cannot promise to marry her. Here is your nurse with some beef-tea, which I am sure you must need after all this talking."

"Yes, indeed, Mr. Noel, you must please go downstairs now. Clayton says there is some luncheon laid for you in the library, and the Squire must really have some rest and quiet now, and try to get a nap before Mr. Brandon comes, or he will be quite unable to talk to him."

So Noel went down into the library, and ate his solitary luncheon, wondering as he did so, if his friend Vaughan and the old Rector were fishing in their favourite little creek in the river Derwent, and if the Rector's daughter had brought their luncheon as usual, and was sitting on the gnarled roots of the old willow tree that overhung the river.

fastening fresh flies on to her father's or brother's line with those dexterous little-fingers of hers, as he had seen her do so often.

Sweet Mabel Vaughan, whose fair, girlish face, and deep blue eyes looked so innocent and unconscious, who had lived all her life in that quiet country home, going cheerfully through her daily round of little duties and simple pleasures. How dearly he had learnt to love her during those two short weeks that he and her brother had been down at the old Derbyshire rectory. And Mabel—did she care for him? As her brother's friend? As a pleasant companion? Yes, but her eyes met his too frankly and fearlessly as yet, he thought for him to hope that she had yet awoke to the consciousness of any warmer feeling, but he had made up his mind to woo, and he hoped to win, Mabel Vaughan for his

wife; and in his hurried leave-taking the evening before, had said some few words to her father which he thought must have shown him pretty plainly what his hopes and intentions were, and that gentleman had said—“ Well, well, we shall always be glad to see you whenever you like to run down for a few days’ fishing.” Which Noel felt to be anything but encouraging, and determined to avail himself of the invitation as soon as he possibly could.

Noel Vanstone was not the sort of man to have consented under any circumstances to marry a girl to whom he was utterly indifferent, even though by so doing he would come into an income of more than £5,000 a year; but now that he had seen Mabel Vaughan it was indeed, as he had said, utterly impossible. His father had died when he was quite a child, and since his mother’s

death, a little more than a year ago, he had had an income of his own of between three and four thousand a year, and this he knew would be enough, and more than enough, for him to live on comfortably, especially with little Mabel Vaughan for his wife, with her simple tastes and habits, so his uncle was quite at liberty, as far as he was concerned, to leave all his money to whom he would.

Just as Noel had finished his luncheon a fly drove up to the door, and he saw Mr. Brandon get out. The Squire had, however, given orders that when Mr. Brandon came he was to be shown up to his room directly, so Clayton took him upstairs at once; but Noel made up his mind that he would see him before he left the house, or perhaps, thought he, the old fellow may think I shall bear him a grudge, and fancy *he* is to blame if the Squire leaves me altogether out of his

new will. He is a kind old fellow, and will be more put out at such a proceeding than I shall ; and Noel laughed as he pictured the dismay of old Brandon, when he found Mr. Noel was nowhere in the new will. For not a doubt had Noel that his uncle, in his anger at having his pet plans thwarted, would so revenge himself. In order that he might be quite sure of Mr. Brandon not leaving the house without his speaking to him Noel went and stood in the large bay window, out of which he could easily see the fly standing at the door.

It was a lovely afternoon in May, and the sun shone brightly over the old-fashioned garden and well-wooded park beyond, through which a broad carriage road wound down to the lodge gates half a mile away. He had but to make the promise that his uncle wished, only to run upstairs, open a

bedroom door, and say half a dozen words, and all that his eyes now gazed at from that window, and far more, would be his own, before many days, or, perhaps, even hours, had passed away ; he knew this quite well, yet never for one moment did he think of altering his determination, to give it all up rather than marry his cousin.

He was a tall, well-made young fellow, of about eight-and-twenty, with bright brown, wavy hair and close-cut moustache. There was a steady, earnest gaze in his dark grey eyes, and a look of firmness about his well-shaped mouth and chin, which made all, who saw him, feel at once he was a man whom they could respect and trust. He had been in the army ; but when his mother's health had begun to fail he had, at her wish, resigned, and returned home from India, and for the two years she lived after he came

back to England he devoted himself to her entirely; but since her death he had been a great deal with his uncle, and had learnt to love the old place and feel at home in it; but there was one thing he had not learnt to do, and that was to admire his cousin Cora. He had seen, when he had last been at the Hall, that his uncle wanted to make up a match between himself and Cora, and had discouraged the idea in every way he could; but evidently the Squire had not been convinced that his little plans were unacceptable.

It had never occurred to Noel that the arrangement his uncle desired would not be so objectionable to Cora as himself. He did not think that young lady cared any more for him than he did for her.





CHAPTER II.

NOEL quite expected that Mr. Brandon would be some time in his uncle's room; but rather to his surprise, scarcely ten minutes had passed when the library door opened, and that gentleman himself came in with a very perturbed look on his good-tempered face.

"I hoped I should find you here, Mr. Noel," he said. "This is an unfortunate business, and I cannot tell you how vexed I am to have to draw up this," and he glanced as he spoke at some folded sheets of blue paper he held in his hand. "I hope you will believe that I tried my best to dissuade your uncle from what he seems so determined on; but he had himself prepared

this draft in case you should object to his wishes, and I am bound to do as he wills in the matter. Now, Mr. Noel, do you not think you could make the Squire some sort of promise that would satisfy him? A thousand things might happen, you know, in the future to make the fulfilling of it difficult, perhaps impossible; the young lady might object, and you could not force her into a marriage against her will."

As Mr. Brandon said the last words he had to smother a feeling of inward conviction that this last contingency was a very unlikely one to arise.

"My dear Mr. Brandon," said Noel, "nothing but a decided promise, both from Miss Stanley and myself would, I feel sure, satisfy my uncle, even if it would, I should not like to say what would deceive him. Do not trouble yourself any more about the

matter. I do not want my uncle's money, and I wish to marry to please myself not to oblige him. Of course it is no fault of yours ; all you have to do is to carry out my uncle's wishes whatever they may be."

" Ah ! you do not know what is in store for you, Mr. Noel," said the lawyer, shaking his head. " I cannot, of course, tell you what are the contents of this new will. All I can say is, that the old Squire has made up his mind that *you shall marry your cousin* whether you will or no."

" I shall never marry her," said Noel, in a very decided tone of voice.

" Then the Lord 'help you all," muttered the old lawyer as he left the room, " for the muddle will be fearful."

Noel followed through the hall to the fly, hardly able to help laughing at Mr. Brandon's evident perturbation.

“I have promised the Squire to be back by six to have this signed,” said Mr. Brandon, turning round to Noel with one foot on the step of the fly, “though how I shall manage to get this complicated will-drawn before then Heaven knows,” murmured he to himself, as the cab drove off.

At about half-past three o’clock the Squire sent down a message to Noel, who was reading in the library, to ask him to go to the Priory House and fetch Miss Stanley. Noel put on his hat, and went off at once; but when he was nearly at the end of the drive he saw Cora Stanley herself come through the lodge gates.

Cora was a small, dark, sparkling brunette, who might have been pretty if she had not looked so ill-tempered, and piquante if she had not been so sharp. She knew far more of her uncle’s little plans, with regard to her

cousin and herself, than Noel had the least idea of, and would, on her side, have made no objection to the arrangement, if, in marrying her cousin, she would also become the mistress of the old hall, with an income sufficient to satisfy her by no means modest demands, and to enable her to queen it over all the country round.

Already she had secretly planned in her mind various alterations that she would *insist* on Noel's making in the grounds, and also in the hall itself, and had drawn out a plan for a new conservatory to be built on to the west wing. Her mother had died when she was a baby, and her father, when she was fourteen. He had been a thoroughly good-for-nothing, selfish man, and at his death she was left without a penny in the world, and had been utterly dependent on her father's sister, with whom she lived, and

her uncle the old Squire, who lived at the Hall at Fryersdale, about a mile from her aunt's house.

He had always been very kind to her, had made her a liberal allowance, and both he and her aunt had let her do as she pleased, and have her own way a great deal more than was good for her.

She had come up to the hall this afternoon fully expecting that her Cousin Noel would be there, as she knew her uncle had sent for him. As soon as she saw him she waved her parasol, which, like the trimmings of her navy blue dress, was of a bright red colour, a salute which Noel acknowledged by taking off his hat. They were, as yet, a great deal too far apart for words. As soon, however, as they came within speaking distance Cora called out in her little shrill voice—

“ I thought you would have arrived, Noel ;

how was it you did not come last night?" and then, without waiting for him to answer, she said, as she shook hands with him, "Was that Mr. Brandon in a fly I saw just now? Has he been here?"

"He has been to see uncle; very likely you have seen him."

"Surely uncle has not been altering his will at the last moment?" exclaimed Cora, looking sharply into Noel's face.

"Really I don't know what he has done," said Noel calmly.

It flashed through Cora's mind that her uncle might have made some change in consequence of Noel's agreeing to those little plans of his, and she determined to try and find this out.

She dropped her parasol, and as Noel picked it up and put it into her hand, she gave him one quick look, and then drooped her eyes on

the ground, trying very hard to blush, in which effort, however, she was either utterly unsuccessful or else the bright colour of her parasol and lining of her broad-brimmed hat entirely eclipsed it.

“But I suppose you have some idea as to what uncle is going to do, have you not, Noel?” she said in a low voice.

“Not the very slightest,” said Noel, on whom the whole manœuvre had been quite thrown away, “and if I had I should not think of saying anything about it, Cora.”

This answer did not very well please his cousin; but she knew Noel well enough to be aware, that it was no use questioning him any more on the subject, so they walked on towards the hall for some minutes in silence. Then Cora asked how the Squire was this afternoon, a question which Noel could not help thinking might have been asked before.

“He is very ill indeed,” he replied, “and wished you to be sent for. I was on my way to the Priory to fetch you when we met; the nurse says she fears the doctor will find uncle much weaker when he comes this afternoon.”

Just as they reached the hall they saw the doctor’s carriage coming up the drive.

“You had better not go up to uncle now until he has seen Fletcher,” said Noel, following Cora into the drawing-room.

“No. Please to ring the bell, I will tell Clayton to bring me a cup of tea.”

“Trust Corrie to take care of number one,” thought Noel as he obeyed her.

Noel went out to meet the doctor in the hall.

“How do you do, Noel?” said that gentleman, “glad to see you here. Your poor uncle will not last much longer, I fear,” he

added in a low voice. "I will go up and see him at once and let you know what I think about him."

"Thank you, I shall be in the drawing-room; Miss Stanley is here."

Cora had just poured out her tea, and was trying to persuade Noel to have some, when the doctor reappeared looking very grave.

"Mr. Vanstone, your uncle tells me he has to see Mr. Brandon on important business this evening, and I am come to tell you that if this is the case, Brandon should be sent for directly, the Squire is sinking fast."

"I will go and order the carriage to be sent for immediately," said Noel, leaving the room. The doctor followed him into the hall.

"Send word he is to come at once, Noel, I doubt if your uncle will live till he comes."

Noel went through the hall and out of the back door into the stable yard to order the horses to be put into the carriage at once, and then wrote a few lines to be taken to Mr. Brandon, explaining to him the urgent need for his coming as soon as possible.

But as he went back into the drawing-room he could not help thinking to himself what a difference it might make to him in all his life to come if Mr. Brandon *was too late* for his uncle to sign the will, and not only to himself, but to others too, and he thought how Mabel would love the old hall and revel in the old-fashioned garden ; still, she would be happy elsewhere, he would not think of it. His uncle had a right to do what he willed with his own. Poor Noel, he little knew how very much more than he dreamed of depended on the length of the frail life of the dying man upstairs.



CHAPTER III.

WHEN Noel returned to the drawing-room he found that Cora had succeeded in persuading the doctor to have a cup of tea.

“ Noel, will you tell us how long Mr. Brandon was in coming after you sent for him this morning. I say he cannot be here for an hour or more—Dr. Fletcher thinks he will not be so long.”

“ I think,” said Noel, “ that it was a little more than an hour after Tom started this morning before Mr. Brandon arrived.”

“ I hope he will not take as long as that now,” said the doctor, gravely.

“ He will be here in much less time than that

I expect," replied Noel, "if he has finished drawing up the will, it is that which I am afraid of, for he appointed to be here again at six o'clock, and it is now scarcely five, but listen," and Noel went to the window and threw it open. "If the horses go all the way at the pace they are going down the drive now, they should be at Berkover in less than fifteen minutes, and be back here before the clock strikes the half-hour after five."

"Heaven grant the poor old Squire may live until then," said Dr. Fletcher, solemnly.

There was a few moments' silence, and then Noel, who was still standing at the window gazing out at the lovely view before him, said quietly—

"Amen!"

"Shall I go up to uncle now?" said Cora to Dr. Fletcher.

"Well, I hardly know what to say about

that. It is, of course, very important that he should be kept as quiet as possible until Mr. Brandon has been. But I think you both better come up into the room next the Squire's bedroom, and I will see how he is, you will then be ready to come the moment you are called."

So they all went up into the little sitting-room adjoining the Squire's room, and Dr. Fletcher went through the open door that led out of it into the bedroom, to see how his patient was.

Cora, who was beginning to look rather nervous, seized hold of Noel's arm, and said in a frightened whisper, "Noel, I cannot be in the room when—I mean at the last—I could not bear it."

"You need not go in at all unless uncle asks for you, or you wish to do so," said Noel, "but if you do come, you must try and

not give way and scream, or anything of that sort."

"I will try not to," replied Cora, in an unusually subdued voice.

After this they both sat for some minutes in silence, then the clock in the Squire's room chimed the quarter past five.

"He may be here in quarter of an hour now," said Noel.

As he said these words the doctor came back with a very grave face.

"I think you had better both come in now. Try and be calm, Miss Cora, your uncle has not spoken for some time, but I think he is not unconscious. You will, however, see him greatly changed since yesterday."

Cora, looking very white, followed Noel into the next room. When she caught sight of the Squire she gave a suppressed cry,

which made Noel turn round and lay his hand gently on her arm, while he said in a low voice, “Hush, Corrie, do not disturb uncle now.”

At first no one in the room thought the Squire had recognised either Noel or Cora, but after a minute or two he said—

“That’s right—both of you here.” And then, in a louder voice, he gasped out, “Where’s Brandon? I want to sign the will.”

“We have sent for him, uncle,” said Noel, going close up to the bedside; “we expect him to arrive every minute.” As he spoke he glanced up at the clock, the hands pointed to twenty minutes past five.

The old man clutched hold of the bed clothes and gasped for breath; the effort of speaking had been almost too much for him.

Noel saw the nurse look at the doctor, then at the clock and shake her head slowly.

No one spoke again. The only sounds that broke the silence were the laboured breathings of the dying man, and the distinct metallic tick of the old-fashioned clock over the mantel-piece.

Corrie would have given the world to go away, but felt spell-bound and unable to move an inch.

Another long five minutes passed away ; there was nothing to be done—they could only wait.

It was Cora's voice that broke the silence at last, saying, "That was the hall door closed."

All listened in silence. Yes, she was right, they heard footsteps on the stairs, and in a minute more the bedroom door opened, and Mr. Brandon came in followed by Clayton. The lawyer gave one quick comprehensive glance at the group, and then walked straight to the bedside, and stooping down close to the Squire, he said in a clear voice—

“I have brought your will, sir. Is it your wish to sign it now?”

A sudden light came into the eyes of the dying man. “Yes,” he said, in a voice that surprised them all, “lift me up.”

The doctor and nurse raised his pillows, and Noel fetched pens and ink from the next room.

Mr. Brandon held the sheets of closely written foolscap, and guided the Squire’s shaking hand to the right place.

The poor old man was gasping fearfully, and no one thought he would be able to write his name, but they were mistaken. For a moment he fixed his eyes on Noel and Cora, who were standing close together, and a strange smile flickered over his worn face.

Then he took the pen and slowly signed his name for the last time. As he wrote the last letter the clock over the mantel-piece chimed the half-hour, and at the sound Cora, whose

nerves were strung to high tension, gave a slight scream.

The Squire dropped the pen, blotting the paper slightly, and fell back. Clayton came forward to sign, the nurse was to be the other witness.

“I think you had better take Miss Stanley away,” said the doctor, looking at Noel.

So Noel supported Cora (who was trembling and quite hysterical) into the next room, and then seeing how upset she was, came back for the nurse. They were all standing round the bed in silence still, and it seemed to Noel all was strangely quiet. He heard his uncle’s laboured breath no more. Slowly he walked up to the bed. The will still lay open on the counterpane, and the signature of John Noel Vanstone was not yet dry, but the hand that had written it was lifeless.

The old Squire was dead.



CHAPTER IV.

IT was a cold, wet and windy day, that twenty-second day of May, when they carried the old Squire, for the last time, through the garden and park in which he had so dearly loved to wander, giving his directions to the old gardener, planning out his flower beds, or gazing with pride at the grand old trees in the well-timbered park. After his death Mr. Brandon had brought to Noel Vanstone a letter in the Squire's own handwriting, dated some months before his death, in which he requested that at his funeral he should be carried by bearers, all the way from his hall door, to the little church, which was only about a hundred yards from the lodge

gates, and that the mourners should follow on foot.

So in accordance with this request the coffin, with its costly purple velvet pall, was carried slowly, through the driving wind and rain, by a double set of bearers, who changed places at intervals. Close behind came Noel Vanstone, Dr. Fletcher, Mr. Brandon and a gentleman, who was a stranger to all, but whom, Mr. Brandon had informed Noel, ought to be asked to the funeral and the reading of the will. Behind the four came a long line of carriages, for the Squire had been much respected, and liked by all in the neighbourhood, though somewhat eccentric in his habits and ways. Just as the procession had nearly reached the park gates, a rather startling occurrence took place, the bearers had stopped under an old chestnut tree, the branches of which overhung the

drive, and afforded a slight protection from the wind and rain. They were in the act of changing places when a small branch broke off with the wind, and fell with a crash on the velvet-covered coffin. The strange gentleman, who was standing by Noel, instantly sprang forward, lifted the branch off and laid it on the grass by the side of the drive. This little scene was witnessed by a large crowd of people who were standing outside the park gates waiting to see the funeral pass, and there were not wanting those among them who looked upon this incident as a portent of evil to the Vanstone family, and a warning that the property should pass away to strangers.

It even seemed as if some such thought passed through the mind of the matter-of-fact old lawyer, for as he saw Captain Tristam (for that was the stranger's name)

lift off the branch, he murmured to himself, "Strange." After this incident, which was remembered and referred to many years after in the parish, the funeral procession passed slowly out of the lodge gates; the crowd standing in the pouring rain with uncovered heads, and in respectful silence. All gazed curiously at the strange gentleman, who appeared uncomfortably conscious of their scrutiny, although he had no idea that the act, which had been the impulse of the moment, had produced the effect it had.

No one among them all could be more puzzled to account for the reason of his presence there than Jack Tristam was himself. He was a rather short, strongly made man of about thirty, with sandy-coloured hair, and reddish moustache, and one of those ugly, good-natured faces, which, in their way, are far from being unattractive. He

was a thoroughly kind-hearted fellow, not overburdened with brains, but having a far worse opinion of his own deficiencies than any of his friends had. Besides his pay as a captain in the army, he had a small income of £150 a year, the interest of which he fortunately could not touch, for Jack Tristam would have most certainly spent it all if he could, for he had that unhappy faculty of spending money without appearing to get anything for it, which so many people possess.

When he received the letter inviting him to Squire Vanstone's funeral he had been lost in astonishment, for to the best of his belief he had never heard of such a person in his life, and was quite unaware that his father had been a great friend of the Squire's in his young days. His invitation to the funeral had created quite a little excitement in his

regiment, some of his brother officers even made bets as to the amount of money he would have left him, and chaffed him about what he would do when he came into his fortune.

His regiment was then quartered at Pembroke Dock, a long way from Fryersdale ; but all agreed that Jack must go, and he asked for four days' leave of absence, and so it came to pass that Jack Tristam was present at the Squire's funeral ; but he was by no means comfortable, feeling himself altogether *de trop*, and conscious that every one, like himself, was wondering what in the world he had to do with it all, and was therefore.

Noel had written him a very civil note, which he had received the night before, when he reached the little inn called the Fryers' Arms, inviting him to return to the hall after

the funeral to hear the will read, "in which," wrote Noel, "I have been led to understand you are in some way interested."

In vain Jack asked himself what the deuce the old fellow could have left him any money for, or even where, and how he could have heard of his existence, and it was not without some sort of bewildered curiosity that he looked forward to the time when all the mystery should be explained to him.

As soon as the sad ceremony was over, and the poor old Squire had been laid in his last resting-place, the family vault of the Vanstones, Noel Vanstone (whom many were already beginning to speak of as the young Squire), Dr. Fletcher, Mr. Brandon, and Captain Tristam, drove back to the Hall, in the carriage Noel had ordered to be in waiting for them, and were shown by Clayton into the library, where there was a warm

cheerful fire, and on a side table were placed some wine, biscuits, and what Mrs. Brooks, the housekeeper, called funeral cakes.

The gentlemen partook of the wine and biscuits, but they all fought shy of the funeral cakes. Then all drew their chairs round the fire, except Mr. Brandon, who sat down at the round table in the centre of the room, with a business-like air, and drew out of his pocket the unfortunate will that Noel had last seen on the bed of his dying uncle.

“Gentlemen,” he said, “I think with your kind permission, that I had better now proceed to read the late Squire Vanstone’s will.”

“Certainly,” Noel replied, “we should all, I think, be glad if you will do so,” and he glanced at the two others. The doctor bent his head in assent, but Captain Tristam, who had edged his chair into a corner by the mantel-piece, and was pulling his tawny

moustache in a nervous manner, murmured, “I am afraid I shall not understand a word of it, the technical language of these legal documents is so very perplexing.”

The lawyer caught the words, and smiling slightly, said, “Perhaps you would all prefer that I should explain to you the contents of the will in plain words. You can of course read it at your leisure afterwards, if you wish.”

“I think that would be much the best plan,” said Noel, and the doctor willingly acceded.

“Well, then,” began Mr. Brandon, “the late Squire, John Noel Vanstone, has appointed Dr. Fletcher and myself trustees of his estate, and has left us each a legacy of £300. These are the only legacies. He has left the whole of his property, real and personal, in the hands of these his trustees, with

power to pay the interest thereof to Cora Maria Stanley, his niece, *as long as she remains unmarried*. In the event of her marrying her cousin, Noel Lancelot Vanstone, which the Squire states to be his express wish, we, the trustees, are empowered to pass over the whole property to him. *But*," and here the lawyer made an impressive pause, "if Cora Maria Stanley should marry any one else, or if Noel Lancelot Vanstone marry any other save Cora Maria Stanley, or if either should die unmarried, the whole of the property is to go to John Berket Tristam," and here Mr. Brandon looked full at Captain Tristam, who gave a great start and a smothered exclamation which sounded like "The deuce it does." "That gentleman," continued Mr. Brandon, "is, I think, in plain words, the contents of the will of John Noel Vanstone. Esq."



CHAPTER V.

“**H**OPE, gentlemen, that I have succeeded in conveying the meaning of the will to you,” said Mr. Brandon, slowly folding up that document.

For a minute no one answered. The doctor’s eyes had been fixed for some moments past on Noel’s set white face, with a compassionate gaze. It was Noel himself who broke the awkward silence.

“Do I understand you rightly, Mr. Brandon? Is it really the case that if I marry, the trustees will have to hand over this old house and all my late uncle’s property to Captain Tristam, and that my cousin will lose her entire income?”

“Yes, I am sorry to say, Mr. Vanstone, that in the event of your marrying that would be the exact state of the case, unless, of course, you married Miss Stanley herself, then you would have *all*, please to clearly understand that.”

“Thank you, that is a point which is perfectly plain to me,” replied Noel, dryly.

Mr. Brandon, who was engaged in tying up the sheets of blue foolscap with a piece of red tape, looked up at Noel as he said these words, with a keen, sharp glance. “Oh,” thought he to himself, “he may die a bachelor but he will never marry that girl, I will take my oath of that, there’s another woman in the road, or he would never look like that. He doesn’t care a hang for the money; confound the women, what a lot of mischief they do make in the world, to be sure.”

“I think I see my carriage coming up

the drive," said Dr. Fletcher, rising. "Mr. Brandon, will you allow me to drive you back to Berkover. I should like to have a chat with you about all this. I have to see two patients in Fryersdale, but perhaps you would not mind waiting in the carriage while I see them."

"Thank you, doctor, I think I ought to call at the Priory House, and inform Miss Stanley of the contents of her uncle's will; perhaps I could go there while you are paying your visits."

"Just so, Mr. Brandon, that will do very well." Then turning to Noel, the doctor took his hand and grasped it firmly in his, "I am very sorry, believe me," he said, "that you should be placed in such a very unpleasant position, Mr. Vanstone."

"So am I," said Mr. Brandon, "and you may be sure that I would have had things

very different if I could have had my way."

Noel held out his hand to the old lawyer. "Yes, Mr. Brandon, I am sure you would," he said.

"Looks as if the old gentleman had concocted a will on purpose to make us all as uncomfortable as possible," burst out poor Jack, as the doctor and Mr. Brandon left the room. "I am awfully sorry, but it is not my fault you know. I don't want your money, and I sincerely hope I shall never get it."

"My dear fellow," said Noel, putting his hand on Jack Tristam's shoulder, "don't you be troubled about all this. Of course you are in no way to blame for these difficulties; pray don't think I bear a grudge against you because you may some day come into my uncle's property."

“Thanks very much, you are very good,” stammered Jack, looking into Noel’s white face, “but it is confounded hard lines for you to be cut out of it all.”

“Oh, it’s not the money I care about,” Noel cried out abruptly, and then breaking off suddenly, he turned away in silence.

A pained look came into Jack Tristam’s face, somewhere down in that honest fellow’s soul there awoke an instinctive perception of the truth. He turned round and looked down into the fire.

“I think I understand, and I am awfully sorry for you,” he said, in a very low voice.

“Understand what?” said Noel sharply.

“Oh, I beg your pardon,” stammered Jack nervously, “I did not mean to be impertinent, I only thought that perhaps you would rather have married some one else instead of your cousin. I will go now, I am

sure to put my foot into it if I stop and say something I ought not," said Jack smiling, " I always do, it is a way I have got. Good-bye."

" No! no! Don't go, Captain Tristam," said Noel, sorry that he had spoken so sharply, " stay and have some dinner with me, and let me send down to the Fryer's Arms for your portmanteau. You had better let them make up a bed for you here to-night, the house is as much yours as mine you know," he added laughing.

" No, thanks, I am going down by the mail this evening ; but I will come and sleep under this roof when the hall is your own, Vanstone, if you and your wife will ask me."

" It will never be mine, Tristam," replied Noel emphatically.

" The price is too dear to pay, eh ? Well,

it is a fine old place, I should think twice, if I were you before I threw it away."

"I don't think it would be throwing it away if you had it, Tristam," said Noel, smiling kindly into Jack's good-natured, anxious face.

"By Jove, it would though; I should be like a round man in a square hole, I shouldn't fit it a bit," and with these last words Jack Tristam passed out into the hall, put on his ulster, and, shaking hands warmly with Noel, went out into the rain and wind, and walked back to Fryersdale.

Once more he had to pass under the old chestnut tree where the little accident had occurred an hour or two before; but so little impression had it made on him that he never looked to see if the little branch still remained where he had laid it. Had he done so he would have seen it had been moved,

for the old gardener, who had been one of the bearers, had taken it away, and hung it up along the top of the tool house, tying on to it a large label like he put on the fruit trees, on which was written, “Branch of chestnut tree lifted off the old Squire’s coffin by Captain Tristam; I, Ezra Leigh, predict that he will some day own the land on which the tree stands from which this branch fell.”

After Captain Tristam had left Noel went back into the library, and sat down to face, as best he might, the trouble that had come to him, for from the moment that the old lawyer had finished explaining the will, he had felt one thing to be certain, and that was he would have to give up all thoughts of Mabel Vaughan.

It would be impossible for him to marry now unless Cora married first, and he felt he-

must not depend on that, for she would lose all her money if she did, and she was not the sort of young lady to give up all for love. If he was to marry Mabel Vaughan, Cora would be absolutely penniless; so all that sweet dream of his must vanish like a castle in the air, yet no, not quite like that, there were those words he had spoken to Mabel's father, when he came away not yet a week ago. He must explain to him how he was bound and tied now. Should he write; it would be very difficult to explain exactly how things stood in a letter; he had better run down and tell the old rector all about it, and have just one more peep at the familiar scenes, and that dear face which— Noel folded his arms and put them down on the table by which he was sitting, leant his head upon them, and through the silent room there came a sound like a stifled sob.

An hour afterwards, when Clayton came in with a note for him, Noel was quietly sitting by the fire reading the newspaper. He was not one to give way for long to any strong emotional feeling ; he had too firm a will, and too much self-control for that.

As Noel took the black-edged envelope off the silver salver, Clayton said—

“ The servant from the Priory is waiting for an answer, sir.”

Noel opened the envelope and found a note from his Cousin Cora—

“ The Priory,

“ May 22nd.

“ MY DEAR NOEL,

“ Mr. Brandon has been here this afternoon to explain the will ; aunt did not see him, as she is laid up with a bad cold ; but I told her all about it afterwards, and we

are both in a state of bewildered surprise over the extraordinary way in which Uncle John has left his property. Aunt says she would very much like to see you if you will come down this evening.

“Yours affectionately,

“CORA M. STANLEY.”

“I suppose I must go,” thought Noel, so he sat down and wrote the following short note:—

“Fryersdale Hall,

“May 22nd.

“MY DEAR CORA,

“I will come and see you and Mrs. Lester about eight o’clock this evening.

“Your affectionate cousin,

“NOEL L. VANSTONE.”



CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Mr. Brandon called at the Priory House after the Squire's funeral he found Miss Stanley sitting alone in the drawing-room, got up in an elaborate costume of black silk and crape.

"I hoped you would call, Mr. Brandon," she said, shaking hands with him. "I suppose you are come to tell me how my uncle has left his property. I hope Noel is to have the hall."

"Well, no, not exactly; the whole property is left in the hands of trustees at present, and *you* will have the right, as yet, to live at the hall, and receive the interest derived from your late uncle's estate."

“Good gracious! But do you mean to say that he has left Noel nothing at all?”

“Well, I will explain to you,” and then once more the lawyer went through the particulars of that unfortunate will again.

Cora listened attentively.

“I see,” she said when he had finished. “It was always my uncle’s wish, I know, that I should marry my Cousin Noel; but it is rather too bad, is it not, to try and drive us into marrying whether we will or no?” and Cora gave a little nervous laugh. “Really it is a very awkward position for us to be placed in, is it not, Mr. Brandon?”

“Miss Cora evidently has not a doubt of Vanstone fulfilling the conditions,” thought the lawyer to himself.

“Most certainly it is very unpleasant for you both, Miss Stanley, and I am very sorry your late uncle should have made such a

young lady in his mind, but he will get over all that after a while and marry his cousin, that he may be able to claim the property for his own. You will see if I am not right, Brandon."

" Well, his cousin will be very disappointed if he does not so act, for she takes it as a matter of course, I am sure," said Mr. Brandon, laughing.

And as far as that was concerned he was certainly right, for Cora did think that Noel would be sure to marry her; like Dr. Fletcher she did not see how he could do otherwise.

" *He* cannot marry any one else, and *I* cannot marry any one else," she thought, " so of course we must marry each other."

It seemed, too, that her aunt, Mrs. Lester, was of the same opinion, for, when Cora went up to her room to tell her all Mr.

Brandon had explained to herself about her uncle's will, that old lady, who was sitting in an easy chair by her bedroom fire, only said—

“How set your uncle was on you two marrying. I suppose Noel will be here presently ?”

“I don't know, auntie, I have just been wondering if he will be likely to come.”

“I hope he will, Corrie,” replied Aunt Maria, “you will feel more settled, and know more what to be about when you have seen and had a talk with him.”

“That is just it ; I feel in such a state of nervous excitement about it all, and yet I can make no plans in my own mind until I know how he is likely to act. Shall I write him a note, and say you would like to see him this evening ?”

“If you like, my dear, but whether I shall be able to see him is very doubtful.”

“Oh, well, never mind, I can easily say you are not so well when he comes,” said Cora. So the little note was written and despatched, and in due time arrived the answer, which Cora read with far from a pleased face, and threw into the fire.

“What does Noel say?” asked her aunt.

“Not much,” replied Cora, with a slight toss of her head and a frown. “He will be here at eight.”

At eight o’clock precisely Noel arrived and was shown into the dining-room where Cora was standing by the fire waiting for him.

“Well, Corrie,” he said, cheerfully walking up to and shaking hands with her, “how are you—has not this been a miserable day? How is Mrs. Lester?”

“Oh! Aunt Maria is very bad, she said she should come down and see you, but I doubt if she will now, she has had such a fit

of coughing half an hour ago ; I told her I thought she ought to go to bed, she has not left her room to-day, and is as cross as two sticks. How wet it was for you all this morning, and having to walk too ; what an odd idea it was of uncle's that his coffin should be carried like that, but the whole will is strange, don't you think so ? ”

“ Well yes, it is rather, but don't you trouble yourself about the strangeness of it, Cora, I am very glad you should have the property, I have quite enough without it, and you may rest quite satisfied that I shall never deprive you of it.”

Cora looked up at him with a puzzled face. What did he mean, she wondered—deprive her of it, why of course not, if she married him it would be much the same as if it were her own ; she wished he would speak plainly.

“ I suppose you will live at the hall now,

Cora?" said Noel, after a few minutes' silence.

"I really don't know what I shall do yet," said Cora, shortly. "I thought you would like to remain there for the present perhaps, Noel."

"Thank you, Cora, but I am off to-morrow, and I shall most likely travel about a little for the present, until I have made up my mind what to do."

"Off to-morrow!" echoed Cora, in amazement.

"Yes," replied Noel, rather sadly, looking dreamily into the fire as he spoke. He was thinking where and for what purpose his journey to-morrow was to be taken.

"But, Noel, what am I to do until—I mean, you must help me to decide what I am to do before you go away."

"I should think your best plan would be

to go to the hall and take Mrs. Lester with you, Cora, but a young lady with five thousand a year may do almost anything she likes," he said, smiling. "Go for a tour in Switzerland, and on to Rome for the winter, if you want a change."

"Is that where you are going?"

"Oh, no! I have not thought much yet about where I shall take myself off to. Some out-of-the-way place, most likely. I am not very fond of the beaten tracks."

"If aunt and I go abroad will you come with us?"

"No. Really Cora, I don't think I can; I make a very bad travelling companion, I assure you. I always want to go my own way. Get a good courier, he would be much more help to you than I should. I will see about one for you if you like, if you decide on going."

“ I shall not go.”

The tone in which Cora said these words made Noel turn round and look at her, and he saw to his surprise that his cousin’s face was flushed, and her eyes flashing, while he could see that she was tapping one of her small feet impatiently on the floor. Evidently she was very angry.

“ Very well,” said Noel quietly ; it was not the first time he had seen his cousin out of temper, apparently without any cause at all.

“ Noel, how aggravating you are,” burst out Cora. “ I really do not know what to make of you to-night. I think you are behaving very unkindly and very inconsiderately to me.”

“ I am very sorry if you think so, Cora. I certainly have not meant to be the one or the other. It would be better I should not

go abroad with you just now, because, considering the nature of uncle's will, people might make remarks, and draw inferences from my doing so, which would be unpleasant for us both."

At this moment Mrs. Lister's maid came into the room with a message from her mistress, to say she felt so ill that she was sorry to say she would be unable to see Mr. Vanstone that evening, and Noel, who was glad of the interruption, rose to go, saying he had several things to see to before he left the hall, and was going off by an early train in the morning, so before the maid was well out of the room he said good-bye to Cora, who still looked very put out. As he reached the hall door, however, she called out—

“ Write and let me know where you are in a day or two.”

“ All right,” said Noel, turning round, “ I

will write as soon as I come to anchor somewhere."

As soon as he was gone Cora ran up to her aunt's room, and burst into a storm of invectives against her cousin.

"What he means I cannot think," she said. "He talks of going away as if he was never coming back, and seems to wish me to act quite independently of him."

"Surely you do not mean you think he will not marry you," said her aunt, sitting up in bed, and staring at her niece with a dismayed face.

"Whatever he means, he *shall* marry me."

Cora, as she said these words, went out of the room, and slammed the door behind her with a bang that nearly shook poor trembling Mrs. Lester out of her bed.





CHAPTER VII.

THE sun was shining brightly when Noel Vanstone drove up the next morning to the little station at Fryers-dale; already it was the talk of the village, that he would not come into possession of the late Squire's property until he had married his cousin, Miss Stanley, that he would fulfil this condition as soon as possible, and come and settle down at the old hall as their young Squire, was the opinion of all. The stationmaster was civility itself. The porter (there was but one at that little station) seized his portmanteau, wraps, and sticks, &c., and found him a first-class

carriage to himself, in which Noel sank back wearily. He had slept little the night before, and felt tired and depressed.

It was seven o'clock when the train left Fryersdale, and it did not reach the little wayside station in Derbyshire, where he had to get out, until three o'clock in the afternoon. Only a week ago Mabel had waved a smiling farewell to him from that very platform. How well he remembered it. He put all his luggage in the cloak-room, and set off to walk the short half-mile through the fields to the rectory. How familiar every step of the way was to him. It was by this same path that they had always returned from fishing.

There was the very spot, he remembered, where one day they had met Mabel, and this was the very place on the old stone wall, where he had rested his fishing basket, and

pulled out in triumph his first trout to show her.

How merrily she had laughed and clapped her hands as she said, "At last. I am so glad." And here was that quaint old Derbyshire stile made of two big upright blocks of stone, which it looked impossible to squeeze between. Down there ran the little brook whose banks were starred with primroses, which they had gathered baskets of, he and Mabel the morning of the day he went away. And here was the gate which they had found locked and Mabel had climbed over so deftly, laughing at the idea of requiring assistance. It was locked now, and as he climbed over it, he came, for the first time, in view of the rectory, and at the sight of it his heart sank within him.

How should he meet her? What should he say to her father? Above all, where

should he find courage to turn his back on all again, and return in two hours through these very fields to the station, leaving all that he cared most for in the world behind him.

In the trees above him the birds were singing sweetly. The sun shone gloriously. Over the lovely hills was a soft purple-tinted haze. All the world was beautiful, all the world was glad. Only in his own heart (so it seemed to him in that bitter moment) was there sorrow and pain.

But it was only for a moment that he lingered, the next he walked resolutely across the last two fields, and then along a little shady pathway under some trees which led to the rectory garden. No one was about, so he went straight up to the front door and rang the bell. The neat little maid-servant greeted him with a smiling welcome.

“Yes,” she said, “master is in. Will you

please walk into the dining-room, sir, mistress and Miss Mabel are out."

So Noel was shown into the familiar old room, with its old-fashioned carved oak bookcase and mantelpiece to match, and a bow window at the end of the room where hung Mabel's pet canary singing loudly.

The old rector came in directly.

"How do you do, Vanstone?" he said, shaking him warmly by the hand, "this is an unexpected pleasure; but I am very glad to see you."

"I am only come for an hour, Mr. Vaughan," said Noel, "on purpose to explain something to you, which I thought you ought to know. You remember the few words I said about your daughter Mabel, when I went away last Wednesday?"

"Yes," said the old rector kindly, he saw poor Noel was greatly troubled.

“ Well, my uncle has left a most extraordinary will, and I fear it will be out of the question for me to marry at all. I will explain how things are,” and Noel briefly informed the rector of the contents of his late uncle’s will. “ I think you will agree with me, Mr. Vaughan, that I should not be doing the right thing if I married and deprived my cousin of all her income, I shall never marry her ; but I cannot do what will leave her penniless. Believe me, it is no light thing for me to give up trying to win your daughter for my wife ; but unless my cousin marries I must remain single, that, at any rate, is my view of the matter.”

“ And it is the right view, Vanstone, there is no doubt about that, and I think my daughter is quite unconscious of the feeling you have for her, she will not suffer, I hope ; but will you let me give you one little piece

of advice? Do not think me unkind, my dear Vanstone," and the old rector laid his hand tenderly on Noel's shoulder, "but I think it would be much better for both, if you will go away without seeing Mabel again, she is out, and you can easily do so. It may seem hard; but it will, I am sure, spare you really fresh pain, and one thing more, do not let your mind dwell on the possibility of your cousin marrying and leaving you free to follow the bent of your own inclinations. Her doing so is improbable, at present at any rate, and if she eventually should marry circumstances may have altogether altered—you are not the only man that has admired my little Mabel," he added meaningfully.

The rector was by no means unconscious of the pain he was inflicting by these words, but he believed it was for the best for Noel, that cost what it might, he should realize at

once that he must give up all thoughts of Mabel both now and in the future.

Noel certainly did experience a sharp pang as he recalled the very evident admiration of the new curate for the rector's daughter, and guessed of whom Mr. Vaughan was thinking, and it did seem very hard that he should have to go away without seeing Mabel once again; however he felt that the old rector was right, and rose to leave at once, but Mr. Vaughan would not let him go until he had made him take some luncheon, then he walked back with him to the station and saw him off. Soon after the train left the station, Noel leaned out of the carriage window that he might catch a last peep of the old willow tree by the river. There it was, and there also was Mabel herself, sitting in her old place with a book in her hand. For an instant he saw her distinctly, the next a turn in the line

had hidden her from his sight. "Good-bye, Mabel," he murmured, and leant back again in the carriage, feeling that now the worst was over.

At Derby he had to change carriages, for he was going on to London that night. He succeeded in getting a carriage to himself, and settled himself comfortably in one corner, and very soon he dropped off to sleep. How long he slept he did not know, but after a time he was awoke by hearing a voice saying, "Why, I declare it's Noel Vanstone—wake up, old fellow."

Noel opened his eyes, and to his astonishment saw an old brother officer of his, whom he had not seen for five years.

"Why, Kingsgate, how are you? Where did you spring from?"

"I got in at the last station, only you were so fast asleep you never saw me. Where

are you bound for, and how is the world wagging with you now?"

"Well, those are both rather difficult questions for me to answer. I am going to London to-night, but where afterwards I know no more than you. I am rather out of sorts with life in general and myself in particular just now."

"Well, the best thing that you can do is to come down with me to Tenby, we are living there now. Ada will be very glad to see you, and we will go out and shoot the puffin and gulls, and fish in the bay, and drive dull care to the winds. What is it that's up with you, eh?"

"Well, I have just lost my uncle."

"And he's not left you his money, I suppose?"

"If that was all it would not trouble me much, but he has left a will that has tied and

bound me in a way that is not pleasant." And once more Noel stated the contents of the will.

"Oh, well, it is not pleasant to have a wife chosen for you, especially if she is not quite to your taste, but if you are to have £5,000 along with her that covers a multitude of things."

Noel frowned. Why was it, he thought, that every one persisted in thinking that he should consent after all to marry his cousin.

"I shall not marry my Cousin Cora; I have not the least intention of doing so, Kingsgate," he said.

The only reply that gentleman made was to give a long whistle. "Oh ! that's it, is it," he thought. "Well, it's rather pickles then for both of you," he said, after a minute's pause. "But you will come down with me to Tenby, won't you, old fellow ? It's a

pretty little place. My wife is not strong now, I am sorry to say, and we went there principally on account of her health, but there is some very pleasant society, and the people are very sociable. Do come."

"I should like to, very much," replied Noel, "but won't it be rather taking Mrs. Kingsgate by storm to go down in this way?"

"Oh, no. I will telegraph to tell her you are coming to-night, she will be delighted—you were always a favourite of hers, you know."





CHAPTER VIII.

NOEL went down to Tenby with his friend next day, and before he had been there a week he had almost recovered his usual cheerful spirits. He was charmed with the place, and spent hours on the sea fishing or shooting with his friend Captain Kingsgate. One thing, however, a little annoyed him, he found everybody down there knew all about his affairs, through Captain Tristam, who he had at first quite forgotten was with his regiment at Pembroke Dock. He had met him twice since he had been at Tenby, as at the present time he was with a detachment of the regiment at the camp at Penally, a little

village about two miles from Tenby. Noel discovered, too, that every one seemed to take for granted, as Captain Kingsgate had done, that he would marry his cousin ; and despite himself he had begun to wonder, as it was in people's estimation the *right* thing for him to do, if he ought to do it ? He could not marry Mabel, would it so much matter if Cora was willing—but he shrank from the idea—he certainly did not like Cora, and she had such a terrible temper. He had written to her to tell her of his whereabouts soon after he came to Tenby ; and one day when he returned from a fishing excursion he found a letter in her handwriting waiting for him.

“ The Priory, May 31st.

“ MY DEAR NOEL,—

“ I was so very much surprised and amused when I read your letter, for only the

day before Dr. Fletcher had been in to see aunt, who has never quite got over the effects of her bad cold, and advised her to go to the seaside, and we had fixed on Tenby —then your letter came saying you were there, it seemed so odd—but I am very glad it will make it so much pleasanter for us. Would you very much mind looking out for some lodgings for us? We should like a dining-room and drawing-room facing the sea, and four or five bedrooms.

“I have bought a pony carriage, and now I want two ponies. Do you think I could get them at Tenby? I should think a pair of strong Welsh ponies would be the right thing to have down there.

“We shall come as soon as you can get lodgings for us.

“Please forgive me for giving you so much trouble, dear Noel.

“Aunt sends her love to you, and wishes to know if you find the air relaxing? Poor old thing, she is in an awful fright about herself, but Dr. Fletcher does not think there is much the matter with her. Hoping to see you soon

“I remain,
“Your affectionate cousin,
“CORA M. STANLEY.”

It must be confessed that Noel's first impulse on reading this letter was to take the lodgings, and then depart from Tenby himself. He knew well all the gossip, all the conclusions, that the good folks at Tenby would come to about himself and his cousin if they were seen about together down there. On second thoughts, however, he determined to remain for the present, and watch Cora a little, to see if he could at all feel that he

could make up his mind to what all the world thought was the proper thing to do. He doubted, however, if Cora herself would agree to the arrangement. When they were sitting at dinner that evening he told his hostess that he had had a letter from his cousin, Miss Stanley, and that she and her aunt, Mrs. Lester were coming down to Tenby.

“Oh! so she’s coming, is she?” said Captain Kingsgate, with a mischievous twinkle in his eye and a glance at his wife, which Noel felt rather than saw.

“Yes,” he said, “and they want me to take lodgings for them. I suppose there are plenty about, are there not?”

“Yes,” replied Captain Kingsgate, “Tenby is very empty now—people have yet to learn that the best and pleasantest months here are April and May, just when all the winter people are gone and the summer ones not

come. We will have a hunt for some to-morrow."

"I know that there are a great many to let," said Mrs. Kingsgate, "Maud Darrell told me so this afternoon—she had been looking for some for a friend."

"Mrs. Darrell?" exclaimed Captain Kingsgate. "What, has she come home then? I must take Vanstone to see her, Ada."

"Of course you must," replied his wife. "There now, Mr. Vanstone, if you want to be sympathised with, advised and charmed, go to Maud Darrell, '*La reine*' as we call her. All the gentlemen rave about her, and almost worship the ground on which she stands. I am devoted to her myself."

"Has this wonderful person a husband?" asked Noel, laughing.

"No, she is a widow, and she *is* charming you will see. She lives with her mother, a

dear, delightful old lady nearly as charming as herself, and who is never in the way," he added, laughing.

" Jim, you will make Mr. Vanstone think Mrs. Darrell is a flirt, and that, I am sure, she is not."

" Hem! No, she is not; but I don't think she objects to admiration, worship, or whatever you like to call it, and most certainly she likes power."

" Oh, Jim, she is very unaffected, and devoid of vanity; but the way every one tells her everything is wonderful, and she never gossips or repeats anything."

" She must be a perfect walking repository of secrets," said Captain Kingsgate, laughing. " We will go and see her to-morrow, Vanstone; perhaps she will help you out of your difficulties," he added with an amused look at his wife.

“ I should like to see her very much,” replied Noel. “ You have excited my curiosity tremendously. Is she young and pretty ? ”

“ She is about five or six-and-twenty ; but pretty ! no, I do not think you will say that is the right word to use when you have seen her.”

“ Oh, I forgot to tell you,” said Noel presently when they were having their coffee in the drawing-room, “ that my cousin Cora wants me to get her a pair of Welsh ponies. Shall I be likely to hear of some down here that would suit her, do you think ? ”

“ Very, I should say. Is there anything else your cousin would like to have, Vanstone, she seems to expect you will arrange everything for her, don’t she, eh ? ”

“ Now, Kingsgate, don’t begin any of that chaff, because you know there is no nonsense of that kind between us. As her cousin,

she knows I am willing to be of any assistance I can to her, or her aunt."

"Oh, yes, very much the aunt. There don't look savage, Vanstone, here's Mr. Davies just come in time for a rubber at whist. Ada, do you feel up to a rubber tonight?"

They had their rubber, and no more was said about Cora; but Noel felt that what he had feared would most certainly come true, and wished Cora and her aunt had fixed on any other place but Tenby.

He and Captain Kingsgate went out the next morning, and took some very comfortable lodgings looking over the north sands. They could see all that was passing in the street, which Noel thought would amuse Mrs. Lester when she could not go out. There were no houses in front of them to hide the view of the lovely little bay, and trees grew

all the way down the steep cliff to the sands.

“I never saw a place where the trees grew right down to the water’s edge like they do here,” said Noel, as coming out of the lodgings he walked across the street and looked down on the sands.

“No, it is very unusual,” replied Captain Kingsgate, “and one of the chief charms of the place I think.”

“Come home to luncheon now and then we will go and call on Mrs. Darrell, and see what you think of her. What day do you expect your cousin to come?”

“I do not know; but I shall write to-day and tell her I have taken lodgings, and I think, from what she says in her letter, they will come almost directly.”

“I expect they will,” said Captain Kingsgate, laughing.

They returned home, and after they had had luncheon and Noel had written his letter, started off to pay their call.

“ Their house is on the south side,” said Captain Kingsgate, “ but we must go through the street that you may post your letter. If we go across the sands to Penally afterwards you will be too late, the post goes out at half-past four here.”

“ Does Mrs. Darrell live on the esplanade?” asked Noel.

“ No, in one of those houses facing the sea, just before you come to the archway in the city walls, where your hat was blown off the other day. I hope she will be at home.”

“ So do I,” replied Noel laughing, “ I am dying with curiosity to see her.”





CHAPTER IX.

MRS. DARRELL was at home, and Captain Kingsgate and Noel were shown up at once into the drawing-room. It was a long and not very large room, furnished in the mediæval style with softly blended tints of æsthetic greens and blues. All this Noel took in at a glance as he followed his friend into the room. The next moment his eyes were rivetted on a woman, who was standing at an oval table near the window, arranging a bouquet of Marguerites in a vase. As his eyes rested on her she turned and came quietly towards them, still keeping in

her left hand a few of the large ox-eyed daisies.

She was tall with hair of a bright golden-tinted brown, drawn plainly off her forehead, and twisted in one close coil at the back of her small well-shaped head. Eyes, whose colour none could ever decide upon, they changed so in her with every varying expression. Was she beautiful? No one had ever questioned it, but her beauty was rather that of colouring and expression, than regularity of feature; but her figure was simply perfect, and as she came forward to meet them Noel thought he had never seen such a graceful woman in his life. She had on a dress of dark peacock blue, with puffed sleeves, and drawings round the neck. She wore no ornaments, only a little frill of lace round her throat and wrists. There was about her an air of perfect repose and dignity, never

any hurry, never any excitement, yet no lack of animation.

Looking at her, Noel understood, or rather felt, how it was that people trusted Maud Darrell with their secrets, and came to her for help and sympathy.

“My wife told me you had returned, Mrs. Darrell, and I have ventured to bring an old friend of mine, who is staying with us, to introduce to you, Mr. Vanstone.”

“I am very glad to see any friend of yours, Captain Kingsgate,” said Mrs. Darrell, shaking hands with Noel.

“I expect you have heard his name before from Captain Tristam,” continued Captain Kingsgate when they were all seated near the window, out of which there was a splendid view of the bay and Caldy Island.

“I think I have heard Captain Tristam speak about him,” replied Maud, letting

those speaking eyes of hers rest for a moment on Noel's face.

“She knows and understands everything,” was his inward thought. “I wonder if she would think it my duty to marry Cora ? ”

“How do you like Tenby, Mr. Vanstone ? ” she said, in her soft, clear voice. “It is rather a dull time just now to see it.”

“I think it is a delightful place,” replied Noel, “and very pretty.”

“I don't think he has half seen it yet,” said Captain Kingsgate, “for though he has been here more than a week, we have been almost all day on the sea, fishing or shooting puffins off Caldy Island. I am going to take him for a walk now across the burrows towards Penally. I don't believe you have been on the south sands at all, have you, Vanstone ? ”

“No, I have not, and I am longing to

groped about in those caverns under St. Catherine's Rock. As yet, I have only seen them from the sea."

"Oh, you ought to see them certainly," said Mrs. Darrell.

"Yes, and he must know the way about, that he may take his cousin, Miss Stanley, to see the sights. We have been looking for lodgings for her and her aunt this morning, Mrs. Darrell."

Once more Maud's eyes met Noel's, and seemed to say, "What is the meaning of this?"

"By-the-bye, Vanstone," went on Kingsgate, "that reminds me we forgot all about the ponies. Mrs. Darrell, you don't know any one who has a nice pair of ponies to sell, do you?"

"Well, I rather think I do, Captain Kingsgate. The Fentons are going abroad almost

directly, and I think Mrs. Fenton would be very glad to part with her pair of ponies."

"There now, Vanstone, did I not tell you that if you wanted help you would never appeal to Mrs. Darrell in vain; she always manages to get one out of difficulties of whatever sort they are."

"Well really what a character you have given me, I shall fall far short of it I fear," said Maud, with a smile which lit up all her face, and a merry laugh which both her hearers echoed. "I will write to Mrs. Fenton to-night, and find out if she really wishes to part with them, and let you know as soon as I receive her answer; that much I can at any rate do for you," she said, still smiling and looking at Noel with those calm clear eyes of hers, that seemed to read his very soul.

"You are very good, thank you," he said;

then added, after a few moments' hesitation, "I feel sure the character my friend has given you is a true one."

"Do you think so," she said quietly, laying the daisies she had kept in her hand until now on a small table beside her.

"Where did you get all those beautiful Marguerites from, Mrs. Darrell?" asked Captain Kingsgate. "My wife would go into ecstasies over them, if she was here."

"The rocks on the north shore are covered with them; I picked them there this morning."

"I will go and gather some for Mrs. Kingsgate to-morrow," said Noel.

"I should think you would find some on your walk to-day," said Maud.

"Very likely," replied Captain Kingsgate, "and I think we ought to be starting now, Vanstone." So they rose and took leave of Mrs. Darrell, Noel feeling as they left the

room not as if he had just paid a call on a stranger, but as if he had met a woman who would be his friend. He was not the first by many who had felt this, after they had clasped Maud Darrell's hand, and looked into her eyes.

Turning out of the house, Captain Kingsgate and Noel went on through the old archway in the city walls, and along the esplanade, with its row of tall new houses facing the open sea, with Caldy Island in the distance to the right, and the long line of Welsh coast on the left. As they walked along the railed pathway by the side of the cliff, Captain Kingsgate said—

“Well, you have not told me what you think of Mrs. Darrell.”

“I think,” said Noel, “that she is just what you said—she was perfectly charming. I should say ‘*La reine*’ was a very good name for her. Are these the burrows?”

continued Noel, as having walked down a steep winding path along the rocks, they came to a low heap of sand hills.

“Yes, but we shall not have such heavy walking after a bit. There, this short turf is pleasant walking, soon it will be covered with dwarf roses in full bloom, and all the nursemaids and children in the place will be here gathering them, but we seem to have it to ourselves to-day, let us go on that rock in front of us—the Black Rock they call it—and sit down and have a cigar. What a lovely afternoon it is.”

“Now this I call delightful,” said Noel, “what a delicious air there is here, and how sweetly those larks are singing.”

“Dear me! you are getting quite sentimental, Vanstone. You must bring your Cousin Cora here, and see if you can’t get spooney on her.”

Noel was silent.

“How well you see Penally from here,” he said presently.

“Yes,” replied Captain Kingsgate, “that is the way to it across the railway bridge, and through the fields beyond. Who is that coming through them now? Why it’s Tristam and Major Dennis, or ‘Dandy Dennis,’ as they call him. Let’s whistle to them as they come by.”

But they whistled in vain, for at the moment a train came rushing along the line just by them, so they went down and hallooed.

“Oh, it’s you, is it?” said Major Dennis, in a drawling tone. “I couldn’t think who the devil it was up there.”

“How d’ye do, Vanstone,” said Captain Tristam, “how many puffin did you kill yesterday?”

“Why, only two; we landed on Caldy Island, and wandered about there.”

“Not much to see or do there, I should say, and nothing to eat or drink,” said Major Dennis.

“Oh, we took our prog with us; Mrs. Kingsgate always takes care of that,” said Noel, laughing.

“The tide’s not up yet,” said the Major, as they came to the end of the burrows, “had we not better go round by the sands?”

“Dennis wants to save the climb up the cliff path,” said Jack Tristam to Noel, “he is afraid of having a red face when we get into the Cliffords’ drawing-room—we are going there to an afternoon tea.”

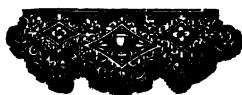
Presently Kingsgate, who was walking in front with Major Dennis, turned round.

“Look, Vanstone,” he said, “I want you to see how quickly the tide surrounds St.

Catherine's rock when once it has got to the place it is in now. You see there is yet some distance for it to run, but I bet you before ten minutes are over you would have to wade across." And he was right, for before they had got off the sands the rugged picturesque rock, up to which they might have walked dryshod a few minutes ago, was an island.

"Now, Dennis, what will you take to wade across with your boots off?" said Jack Tristam.

"I wouldn't go for a ten-pound note," replied Major Dennis, languidly; but there was to come a time—but we must not anticipate.





CHAPTER X.

BY return of post Noel received a letter from Cora, saying they would start the next day and arrive at Tenby by the 7.30 train in the evening, and asking him to order a fly to meet them at the station. “And please come and meet us yourself,” added Cora, “for I have a new French maid, and I do not know how she may manage with the luggage.”

It was a pouring wet day, too bad to think of going out anywhere, so Noel and Captain Kingsgate made themselves as happy as they could at the club, which was at the end of the row of houses called The Croft, where the Kingsgates lived.

At about eleven o'clock a note was sent on there to Noel from Captain Kingsgate's house, which on opening he found came from Mrs. Darrell.

“ Breezelands, June 4th.

“ DEAR MR. VANSTONE—

“ I have heard from Mrs. Fenton this morning. She says she would be very glad to sell her ponies, and will drive them into Tenby this afternoon, and be at my house at three o'clock, that you may see them if you like. It is so wet to-day that I should hardly think she would come, but the Pembrokeshire people do not think much of rain, so you had better be at my house at three o'clock, in case she should arrive. I shall be very glad to see you.

“ Yours truly,

“ MAUD DARRELL.”

the bell
was
the same
sitting
with a
and
one of
and lady he
and ribbons,
old lace collar

“Mother, this is Mr. Vanstone,” said Maud, after she had shaken hands with Noel, turning to the old lady, and speaking slowly in her clear voice.

The old lady smiled, nodded her head, and held out her hand to Noel, then went on with her knitting as before.

“Mother is a little deaf,” said Maud, “if you say anything to her you must speak very slowly and distinctly please; but she never cares to talk much.”

“I should think your friend Mrs. Fenton would hardly drive in to Tenby to-day, it is pouring in torrents,” said Noel.

“No, I don’t think she will,” replied Maud. “You will have had your wet walk for nothing; but I expect you do not care much about rain, do you?”

Noel felt he would have walked a good many miles in it, to sit in that pretty room,

and look on the calm beautiful face of the woman who was sitting within a few yards of him, shading that lovely face of hers, partly from him, and partly from the fire, with that gorgeous fan of peacock's feathers.

"Oh, I don't mind the rain a bit," he replied. "I am very glad to have something to do, and I certainly do not feel that I have had a wet walk for nothing." And Noel looked significantly into Maud Darrell's eyes.

She met his glance with a calm steadfast gaze.

"Please never pay me direct or indirect compliments, Mr. Vanstone," she said quietly. "I have a very great dislike to them."

"I beg your pardon, I will not do it again," replied Noel quickly. "I might have known she would not like it," he said to himself.

"When are Mrs. Lester and your cousin coming?" asked Maud.

“To-night,” replied Noel.

“What a miserable day for them to travel ; but in that case, it will be just as well if Mrs. Fenton should not come to-day, as your cousin will, perhaps, be able to see the ponies herself to-morrow. You had better bring her here at the same time to-morrow, it will most likely be fine after all this rain ; if so, Mrs. Fenton will be sure to come.”

“Thank you,” said Noel, “I will tell my cousin, and I have no doubt she will be very glad to do so ; but really, Mrs. Darrell, I am afraid we are being very troublesome to you about it all.”

“Oh, dear no, you are not ; I like it,” replied Maud, smiling. “You forget that Captain Kingsgate’s description of me was, that I considered it my vocation to meddle in other people’s affairs.”

“Oh, no, that was not the way he put it,” exclaimed Noel.

Maud laughed.

“ Well, you will see if it is not true.”

“ I give you free leave to meddle in mine as much as you like, Mrs. Darrell.”

“ Do you,” she said, dropping the fan from before her face, and looking gravely into his eyes.

Noel felt strongly inclined to tell her all his difficulties, and ask her if she, like others, thought he would be doing the right thing in asking Cora to marry him ; but he resisted the impulse. “ I will wait until she has seen Cora, she will be better able to judge then,” he thought ; “ but I will ask her some day. I should get a calm unprejudiced opinion, I know, from her. Do you think Mrs. Fenton is likely to come now, Mrs. Darrell ? ”

“ No, I should say certainly not, Mr. Vanstone.”

“ Then I will say good-afternoon. Is there

anything I can do for you in the town, it is too wet for you to go out?"

"Thank you, I should be very much obliged to you if you would leave these two books at the library for me as you pass, and ask them to send up the third volume."

"I will do so with pleasure," replied Noel. So he shook hands with the quiet old lady, who gave him another smile and nod, and with the library books in his hand he went away.

I think that I need hardly say that he himself brought the third volume back, and left it at Breezelands for Mrs. Darrell.

How it rained that evening when Noel went down to the station, as in duty bound, to meet Mrs. Lester and Cora. It was quite hopeless to attempt to hold up an umbrella it was so windy, and the rain drifted into the back of his neck, and ran in streams off his

bowler hat, and, of course, the train was late. Did any one ever go to meet a friend at the station and find the train come in to its time? However, at last it did steam into the station, twenty minutes late, and out got Mrs. Lester, a moving bundle of wraps, and Cora in a black Newmarket cloak, looking very cross and tired, and then from a carriage next to them came a dark-eyed, dark-haired, and, Noel thought, very evil-looking French maid, who, however, seemed to know her business, for she ordered the porters about, and found the luggage in next to no time. Noel saw his cousin and her aunt into the fly, and told them he would call the next morning and see them.

Cora pressed him very much to return with them and have some supper, which she had ordered to be ready for them; but Noel excused himself from doing this by telling her that they were waiting dinner for him at the

Kingsgates, and having seen the French maid and the luggage safely into the 'bus, he once more trudged back through the wind and rain.

“ Well, I hope you have had enough of it,” said Captain Kingsgate, as Noel came dripping into the hall.

“ Indeed, I have,” replied Noel, laughing and pouring the rain off his hat into the umbrella-stand.

“ I am sure your fair cousin ought to be very much obliged to you for going to meet her such a dreadful night,” said the Captain. “ Didn’t she say so ? ”

“ No, she didn’t,” replied Noel, laughing as he ran up to get off his wet coat, and dress for dinner, which he knew he had already kept waiting half an hour.

Fortunately the Kingsgates were very easy-going people, and he knew his hostess would not be put out by such a trifle as that.



CHAPTER XI.

IT was beautifully fine the next morning, when Noel went to see how Mrs. Lester and Cora were after their journey. He found Cora in high good-humour, pleased with the lodgings, and the view from the windows, and ready to go out and see the sights. Noel told her about the ponies, and Mrs. Darrell's invitation.

“Who's Mrs. Darrell?” asked Cora.

“She is a friend of the Kingsgates, a very charming woman; you will like her, I am sure, everybody does.”

“Oh! do they,” replied Cora, rather shortly. “Well, I will go with you this

afternoon, Noel, if you will call for me at three o'clock; but at present I want to go out and see what Tenby is like. Our land-lady says that the sands on the south side are the best. Can you come with me, Noel?"

"Yes, if you like."

So the two walked together round the Castle Hill and down on to the sands. It was low water, so they wandered about in the caverns under St. Catherine's rock. Cora was delighted with everything, and Noel thought he had never seen her so pleasant and good-humoured; and, standing on the rocks, with her black cashmere dress blowing about with the wind, her eyes bright with laughter, and her cheeks rosy with the sea breeze, she looked positively pretty, which he had never thought her before.

Cora was by no means unconscious of this

fact herself, and made the most of her opportunity. She found the rocks slippery, and needed a hand to help her. Her hat blew off, and Noel had to clamber over the rocks to fetch it, and when he came back he found that this same tiresome breeze had loosened her hair, which was very long and abundant. She could not stand without holding on to something with one hand, therefore could not fasten her hair up without assistance, so he had to hold her steady while she "did up" the refractory locks, and all the time she was not a bit put out by all these little mishaps, but thought it great fun, and Noel "such a dear good fellow."

Altogether they had, as she said "a very jolly morning," and when she parted from her cousin at the door of her lodgings, after having appointed to go with him to Mrs. Darrell's in the afternoon, she felt satisfied

with herself, and was very glad that she had been able to persuade her aunt to come down to Tenby.

When they reached Breezelands that afternoon they found the carriage and pair of ponies at the door, and Mrs. Fenton in the drawing-room.

It was agreed that Mrs. Fenton should drive Cora along the Esplanade, that she might judge how she liked the ponies, and Noel was to look on and give his opinion; Maud saying, "that she should put on her hat and go to the Esplanade too, as she was going to make a call there."

Noel went down and assisted Mrs. Fenton and Cora into the carriage and saw them off, and then waited for Mrs. Darrell.

This little manœuvre of his did not please Miss Cora at all. The moment she had seen Maud Darrell she had felt that she was a

dangerous person, and might interfere with her own plans and hopes. She could not disguise from herself that Mrs. Darrell was very beautiful, and she could see that Noel admired her very much, and when after they had driven off, she turned round and saw Noel waiting for Mrs. Darrell, her anger was so great she could scarcely control herself sufficiently to appear to look at and take an interest in the ponies.

“There are three of the officers standing at the other end of the Esplanade,” said Mrs. Fenton. “I suppose you do not know any of them yet, Miss Stanley?”

“No; what are their names?” asked Cora.

“That tall lardy-dardy-looking fellow is Major Dennis, and the one with a reddish moustache Captain Tristam; the other is a young lieutenant named Blount.”

“I forgot Captain Tristam’s regiment was down here,” murmured Cora.

“Do you know him then, Miss Stanley?”

“No, but I have heard about him; my uncle knew his father very well, I believe.”

Then Mrs. Fenton remembered that she had heard some wonderful tale told her about an old man leaving a very odd will by which Jack Tristam might some day come into a lot of money, and that there was a girl concerned in the affair named Miss Stanley, she supposed this was the young lady, and looked at Cora with increased interest, determined to find out from Major Dennis at the first opportunity all the particulars of this latest piece of entertaining gossip.

Meanwhile Noel and Mrs. Darrell had come on to the Esplanade, and were standing

watching the ponies. As soon as Cora saw them she gave an impatient toss of her head and said "she thought the ponies would suit her very well ; that she was quite willing to give Mrs. Fenton the price she asked, and would not detain her any longer."

"But will you not drive them yourself, and try how they go ?" said Mrs. Fenton, rather surprised at Cora's sudden decision.

"Thank you, well I think I will," said Cora, as she saw Mrs. Darrell go into one of the houses on the Esplanade, and Noel coming towards them alone.

The gentlemen standing at the end of the Esplanade were all this while watching the carriage driving up and down.

"Mrs. Fenton is trying to sell her ponies I think," said Major Dennis. "I heard she wanted to part with them before they went abroad. There's Vanstone speaking to them,

that girl with Mrs. Fenton must be his cousin ; is it not, Tristam ? ”

“ I don’t know, I never saw her, but I shouldn’t like to be the ponies and be driven by her. What a pace she’s going at.”

“ Has no more notion of driving than a pig,” said young Blount.

“ My word how she cut round that corner into Victoria Street. If she does not come to grief in these narrow Pembrokeshire roads before the month’s out I’ll eat my hat,” exclaimed Jack excitedly.

“ So much the better for you my dear fellow if she does, if it’s Miss Stanley,” drawled Dennis.

“ Nonsense, you know I did not think of that,” said Jack, frowning.

Just then Captain Vanstone came up to them.

“ What do you think of those ponies,

Tristam ? My cousin, Miss Stanley, is thinking of buying them."

"They are good strong little ponies, and used to the hills, which is a great thing here—I should think she could not do better than buy them if she wants them to use down here."

"So I think," said Noel. "Here they come again—what a pace the ponies are going at; women always like to drive fast, and are never happy unless they have the whip in their hands," he said laughing. "Oh, they are coming to a standstill, I must go and see what my cousin has made up her mind to do."

Cora had made up her mind to buy them, and arranged with Mrs. Fenton that they should be sent over in three days' time. She even engaged the groom as well. A carriage she had purchased before she came to Tenby,

so everything was decided on at once, and Mrs. Fenton drove off satisfied.

Noel secretly thought that Cora had given rather a long price for her ponies, but as she could afford it he did not see why he should interfere.

He introduced Cora to Jack and Major Dennis, and Captain Tristam introduced his friend Mr. Blount, then all walked back towards the town, Major Dennis talking to Cora, whom he said afterwards he thought "rather a jolly girl."

Cora knew how to make herself agreeable when she chose, and *when* she was in a good temper was pleasant enough.

"Are you going home now, Cora?" asked Noel presently, as they were walking up the High Street. "Mrs. Kingsgate said she should come and call upon you this afternoon. I should like you to see her. She goes out

very little as she is a great invalid. She is making rather an effort to call upon you, I think."

"Very well, I will go home then," said Cora. "I am rather tired, and shall be glad to rest; that clambering about the rocks this morning was rather fatiguing."

"Have you been down on the rocks this morning, Miss Stanley?" asked Captain Tristam.

"Yes, and I enjoyed it immensely," said Cora, looking into Noel's face, and smiling. "Mr. Vanstone and I were wandering about those delightful caverns under St. Catherine's Rock all this morning. I think Tenby is the prettiest watering place I have ever been to. Is it safe boating here?"

"Yes. Are you a good sailor, Miss Stanley?" said Major Dennis.

"Very; I enjoy being on the water very

much. Noel, will you take me out fishing with you some day ? ”

“ Oh, yes, if you like; but I expect you would find it rather stupid work; we have to go so slowly when we are fishing. We had better have an expedition to Caldy, or something of that sort, you would find that more fun; but here we are at your lodgings. Good-bye, I shall go on to the club now. Shall see you to-morrow I daresay.”





CHAPTER XII.

CORA intended to get Noel to take her for a walk the next day ; but it was very wet again, and she had to give up all thoughts of going out, and could only hope that Noel would come in to see herself and aunt presently.

The morning passed, however, without his making his appearance, and the weather did not improve, nor did Cora's temper, and as the afternoon wore away, and still Noel did not put in an appearance, she grew so impatient, restless, and cross, that poor Mrs. Lester had a very bad time of it.

In the evening a note came from Mrs. Kingsgate inviting Mrs. Lester and Miss

Stanley to dine with them on the following Wednesday.

Cora wrote and accepted the invitation, and sent a little note, at the same time to Noel, saying she and Mrs. Lester were very dull and miserable, "would he come and have a chat with them."

In answer to which he wrote to say, "that he was going with the Kingsgates to spend the evening with some friends of theirs, who lived next door."

The following day was Sunday, but there was no hope, Cora saw, of being able to get to church; the rain had ceased, but there was a tremendous gale blowing. People coming round from the Croft could scarcely stand against the wind. Cora and her aunt watched them from the window. At about two o'clock in the afternoon they saw Noel struggling along the street, and going

towards the town. He nodded to them, took a letter out of his pocket to show what his errand was and passed on.

Having posted his letter he thought he would go down on to the steps leading from the Esplanade to the sands and watch the sea, as it was nearly high tide ; but when he had passed through the archway leading on to the Esplanade he was nearly blown off his feet, and it was only by holding on to the wall and railings that he at last managed to get to the steps. Down these he passed with great difficulty ; but when he at last reached a comparatively sheltered spot under a big rock, and could look about him, he was well repaid for his trouble.

The scene was grand, the huge waves tumbling in one after the other, and dashing the spray even up to where he was standing. The roar of the waves was almost deafening ;

but as he stood there he fancied he heard a voice, and turning round he saw Mrs. Darrell clinging to the railings on one side of the steps. In one moment he had clambered up to her.

“ Oh ! Mr. Vanstone,” she gasped, “ I was so thankful to see you. I really thought I should be blown away. I had no idea there was such a wind as this ; is it more sheltered where you were standing ? I must try and get down and see those glorious waves.”

“ Yes, it is better there ; if you will give me your hand I think we can manage to battle our way to comparative shelter.”

It was no easy matter, however, and when they reached the rock Maud sat down exhausted, yet laughing all the time.

“ I never was out in such a wind in my life,” she said as soon as she could speak.

Noel shook his head.

“I cannot hear a word you say,” he shouted.

At this moment a huge wave dashed up against the rock where they were and covered them both with spray.

Noel stooped down close to Maud, and said—

“You will get dreadfully wet I am afraid, Mrs. Darrell.”

“I don’t mind that in the least. I have nothing on that will hurt,” she answered back.

So they remained watching there for more than half an hour utterly regardless of the spray which drenched them both, and enjoying the grandness of the sight immensely. To carry on a conversation was impossible. An occasional exclamation when an unusually big wave came rolling in, and an entreaty from Noel, “that Mrs. Darrell would move

to a rock higher up to escape the spray" was all that could be said, and even then they guessed what was spoken rather than heard.

At last Mrs. Darrell said, "she must try and return home if Mr. Vanstone would help her."

So Noel gave his hand again.

The wind was more at their backs now, and it was easier than coming down; but when they reached the corner of the Esplanade a sudden tremendous gust came, and Maud would have been blown violently against the wall by the archway if Noel had not put his arm round her and held her.

He himself had to hold on to the wall for a minute until the violence of the squall was past, then he fought his way through the archway, almost dragging his companion after him. Once the other side and there was no further difficulty. They were, how-

ever, both of them glad to reach the door at Breezelands, and Maud sat down on a chair in the hall, quite out of breath and exhausted.

“ What should I have done, Mr. Vanstone, if you had not been there ? ” she said, when she recovered her breath. “ I do not believe that I should ever have got through that archway without your assistance.”

Noel laughed.

“ It was a struggle, certainly,” he said, “ I don’t believe you could have walked against it alone. I am afraid you are very tired, aren’t you ? ”

“ No, I am all right now ; come up and see mother, she informed me the other day after you were gone that she thought you were the nicest young man she had seen for a long time. I hope you feel flattered.”

“ Indeed, I do,” said Noel.

The wind seemed to have blown away a little of Maud's dignity as well as the smoothness out of her hair, which had escaped from under her hat, and was waving over her forehead in a most bewitching manner.

Noel went upstairs and gave the old lady an amusing account of their adventure, while Maud went away to take off her wet ulster, returning to the drawing-room dressed in a black satin costume, with lace round her throat, and silver ornaments, looking as if a breath of air had never ruffled her dress, or played with her hair, and never would dare to do so.

“ My dear,” said her mother as she came in, “ how could you go out in such a wind ? Mr. Vanstone says you were nearly blown away.”

Maud smiled.

“ I am very much obliged to Mr. Van-

stone," she said. "I think I should have been picked up in pieces if it had not been for him. You have not told me," she continued, turning to Noel, "whether your cousin, Miss Stanley, bought Mrs. Fenton's ponies."

"Yes, she has settled to have them. They are to come to-morrow. I only hope she will be able to drive them; I do not think she is much used to holding the reins."

"I think they are very quiet," replied Maud. "I have often been out driving with Mrs. Fenton, and they always behaved very well."

Noel only stayed a few minutes longer, for he knew that Cora would be expecting him to go in and see her on his way back, and he did find her wondering "where he had gone to."

"I have been down on the rocks on the

south side," he said, "and it was lucky I went there, for Mrs. Darrell came down, and could not stand against the wind."

Cora's eyes flashed.

"Oh! so you have been down there with *her* all this time."

Noel looked surprised.

"Yes, and we had great work to get back against the wind."

"Of course she saw you pass or she would not have attempted to go down there," said Cora, laughing.

"Mrs. Darrell is not at all that sort of person," replied Noel, looking annoyed.

"Nonsense, those quiet women are up to a great deal more than you give them credit for. What a goose you are, Noel."

As she spoke Cora laid her hand on Noel's arm, and looked up into his face mischievously; but he moved away from her.

He felt quite sure Maud Darrell had not followed him, but it was useless to say any more.

“ Will Mrs. Darrell be at the Kingsgates’ on Wednesday ? ” asked Cora.

“ Yes, she is coming ; but it is quite a small party. Mrs. Kingsgate is not strong enough to have many people. We shall only be eight altogether ; Major Dennis and Captain Tristam are asked.”

“ How long are you going to remain at the Kingsgates’, Noel ? ”

“ Only a few days longer.”

“ But you are not going to leave Tenby, are you ? ”

“ No, not at present. I think I shall stay at the Gate House Hotel. I like Tenby.”

“ I am so glad. I should have been dreadfully disappointed if you had gone away just as we have come. I should have had no one

to take me about, and you will look after me now, won't you, Noel?"

"I think you are quite able to take care of yourself, Cora," said Noel, laughing; "but I shall be very glad to take you some expeditions. I mean to get up a pic-nic next week."

"And take Mrs. Darrell I suppose," thought Cora. "I wish that tiresome woman was at Jericho."

"I am going with some other fellows fishing to-morrow, Cora, and on Tuesday I am going over to Pembroke Dock, so you will not see much of me the next two days; but we shall meet on Wednesday at any rate I suppose. For the present good-bye. We dine earlier on Sunday, so I must be off."

Cora felt very disappointed and cross after Noel had gone. She went up into her maid's room and told that sharp-eyed person that

she must make her look as well as she possibly could on Wednesday.

“ Yes, Mademoiselle, you shall look lovely, there shall not be any one so beautiful as you.”

Cora wished she could believe that this would be the case, or, at any rate, that Noel would think so ; but she doubted it, and the doubt made her wild.





CHAPTER XIII.

THE guests were nearly all assembled in Mr. Kingsgate's drawing-room. Cora was already beginning a flirtation with Major Dennis, and was looking her very best, thanks to Mademoiselle Zélie, in a very pretty dress of black tulle and jet ornaments, and a bunch of white narcissus in her hair. Captain Tristam had not come; at the last moment he had been called away to Pembroke on some regimental duty, and had been obliged to send an apology by Major Dennis, and as yet Mrs. Darrell had not arrived.

She did not keep them long however. As Cora heard the servant announce her name, she looked up from a book of photographs

she was looking at, and *hated* her for being so lovely. Yet Maud was very simply dressed; she had a cream-coloured cashmere, made very plainly, with a long train; the bodice cut low at the throat, and sleeves to the elbow; a feather trimming of the same shade as the dress round the bodice, and sleeves. She had a piece of broad black velvet round her throat, from which hung a locket of pearls and diamonds, and above the velvet, one row of large pearls. In her hair was a diamond star.

Noel looked up at her as she entered the room, and probably he was himself unaware of the intense admiration that his eyes expressed, but was it his fancy, or could it indeed be true, that as their eyes met, there came over that lovely face a deeper shade of colour, and for one moment the calm, steadfast eyes fell beneath his own.

Noel's heart beat quicker at the thought, and as he shook hands with her, he held the little gloved hand a second longer in his own than there was any occasion for.

At that moment the servant announced "that dinner was served," and Captain Kingsgate offered his arm to Mrs. Lester.

"Vanstone," he said, "I fear you must take down two ladies, as Tristam has disappointed us."

So with Cora on one arm and Mrs. Darrell on the other, Noel got down the stairs as best he could, and sat between them at dinner, and to do him justice, he divided his attentions pretty equally between the two.

It was a very merry dinner. Captain Kingsgate was most amusing, and Cora brightened a little and talked away at a great rate. The champagne was excellent, and Major Dennis kept making the servant fill

Mrs. Lester's glass, until Noel whispered to Cora, that her aunt would certainly be screwed if she went on like that, which amused Cora greatly as Mrs. Lester was a most abstemious person as a rule. Certainly it made the old lady talk, and she seemed to be thoroughly enjoying herself, and when the ladies went up into the drawing-room after dinner, she told Cora that she thought the Tenby air had already done her a great deal of good.

“ My dear auntie, it's the champagne.”

“ Champagne, my dear ! Why, I only had two glasses.”

“ Oh, haven't you ? ” said Cora, laughing. “ Never mind, it has done you good.”

When the gentlemen came up into the drawing-room they found Cora at the piano. She had a very good voice, but sang rather loudly, and without much expression.

“Do you sing, Mrs. Darrell,” asked Noel, going up to her.

“Yes, I do ; I am very fond of music.”

“Now, Mrs. Darrell,” said Captain Kingsgate, “will you please go to the piano ? Is your music here ?”

“Yes,” said Maud, quietly walking to the piano, and drawing off her gloves.

Noel followed and gave her the music ; she chose a simple ballad. She had a rich, clear, and very sweet voice, and sang with great expression. When she had finished, Noel only said,

“Thank you, Mrs. Darrell. You will sing us one more, will you not ?”

“If you wish.” And she sang an Italian song.

“Thank you very much, it is a treat to hear you,” Noel said in a low voice. “I suppose I must not pay any compliments,” he

added in the same tone, looking into her face and smiling.

“ Now, what are you going to do ? ” said Captain Kingsgate. “ Mrs. Lester, do you play whist ? ”

“ Yes, I am very fond of a rubber,” replied the old lady.

“ Mrs. Darrell,” said Noel, “ I have an idea that you are a chess player—am I right ? ”

“ Yes ; but I expect you have been told,” she replied, smiling.

“ Will you have a game with me, while the others play their rubber ? Mrs. Kingsgate will prefer to be quiet, I know.”

“ I should like it very much, Mr. Vanstone.”

Noel went round to the other end of the room, where Captain Kingsgate and Major, Dennis were trying to arrange their rubber and told them that he and Mrs. Darrell were

going to play chess, so they would be just right, without troubling Mrs. Kingsgate.

“Yes, I shall be very glad to sit quiet and look on,” said Mrs. Kingsgate.

Cora set her little white teeth, and felt furious.

Could Noel mean anything serious?

Could it be possible that he would not only refuse to marry her, but marry some one else, and deprive her of all the money. Was it to be expected that she, whom he ought to marry, would sit quietly there and see him make love to another woman before her very eyes.

Major Dennis had but a very indifferent partner. Happily he was not easily put out of temper, and besides, he was quick enough to see through a great deal that was going on, and Cora’s evident jealousy amused him much, her invariably trumping his best card

disturbed him very little, particularly as they were only playing sixpenny points.

As for Mrs. Darrell and Noel they were quite absorbed in their game, or at any rate *she* was, possibly Noel may have remembered sometimes to look at the lovely face that bent so earnestly over the table in front of him.

They were very well matched, and the whist players had finished their third rubber, and Mrs. Lester's and Cora's fly was announced before the game of chess was over.

It was a lovely evening, but Mrs. Lester was afraid of the night air, and short as was the distance, had insisted on having a fly.

The two said good-night, disturbing, for a few minutes, the chess players.

Noel could not help noticing Cora's look of anger as she said "Good-night" to him; but was quite at a loss to account for its meaning.

Major Dennis went down to see them into their cab, and have a cigar at the club afterwards, and Noel checkmated Mrs. Darrell within five minutes after they were gone.

“There,” said she getting up, “I have enjoyed my game very much, Mr. Vanstone, and must have my revenge some day.”

“With pleasure,” said Noel; “but are you going? Your fly has not been announced.”

“No, I have not ordered one; but I expect my servant is waiting to walk home with me.”

“May I not see you home?” said Noel half afraid she would be angry with him for offering.

“If you like, Mr. Vanstone, and I will allow you to smoke a cigar on the way; I do not object to the smell of tobacco out of doors.”

Noel did not smoke ; but he walked home with Mrs. Darrell, and Captain Kingsgate said to his wife when they were gone—

“ There are not many fellows that Maud Darrell would have granted that favour to. I wonder what Miss Stanley would say to it. Did you see what a wax she was in at their playing chess together ? ”

“ Yes ; I don’t like her much, she seems a bad-tempered, jealous little thing,” said Mrs. Kingsgate.

“ Still, it is rather hard lines to lose her money and her young man at the same time,” said Captain Kingsgate, laughing, “ and I strongly suspect that is what will be the upshot of it all.”

“ Oh, but they all admire Mrs. Darrell. I do not suppose Mr. Vanstone thinks anything more about her than the rest.”

“ The rest, as you call them, would think

a good deal more about her than they do, if they *dared*," said Captain Kingsgate, "but usually Maud Darrell holds her head so high that they can only worship at a distance."

Meanwhile Noel and Mrs. Darrell walked quietly down through the town, talking very little; but when they reached Breezelands Noel said, as he took her hand to bid her good-night--

"You said the other day, Mrs. Darrell, you liked to meddle in other people's affairs. I am in a difficulty. Will you let me tell you what it is? I should very much like to have your opinion on a subject that is troubling me much."

"I am quite willing to hear what it is," said Maud, looking into his face; "but I doubt if I shall be able to help you, I am not so wise as people make me out to be. Come to-morrow at two o'clock and I will see you

and listen to what you have to say. Good-night."

As Noel walked back he thought, "I shall tell her, for I want to hear what she will say; but I do not believe that anything could make me marry Cora. How cross she looked to-night."





CHAPTER XIV.

NOEL VANSTONE had arranged to leave the Kingsgate's the morning after the dinner party, they had pressed him to remain longer, but he knew that a sister of Mrs. Kingsgate's and her husband were coming to stay with them very soon, and felt sure it would not be convenient for them to have him there, so he had taken a room at the Gate House Hotel, and was busy all the morning after the party moving his belongings there.

At a quarter to two he set off to keep his appointment with Mrs. Darrell. As he was walking down the High Street he saw Cora

and her French maid come out of a milliner's shop and walk up the street towards him.

"I wish I had gone round the other way," he thought, "I am afraid she will stop and talk and hinder me." However, Cora had evidently seen him, so there was nothing for it but to walk on and get away as soon as he could.

"I am very glad to see you, Noel, you are the very person I want," said Cora, shaking hands with him. "Come back with me. I want you to see how the ponies look in the new carriage. I am rather afraid they are a little small. I ordered Richards to bring them round at half-past two. I am going to drive them this afternoon, and see how they go. Will you come with me? Suppose we go to Saundersfoot, I have not been there yet."

"I am sorry, but I cannot come now, Cora.

I have an engagement; but if you will put off your drive for an hour I shall be very glad to go with you."

Cora looked anything but pleased; but she said—

"Very well, I will send round to the stables and tell Richards not to bring the carriage round until half-past three if you will be at our lodgings then."

"Yes, I will be with you by that time," said Noel, and walked on.

"Now where is he going?" thought Cora. "To Mrs. Darrell's I believe," and she stopped and pretended to be looking into a shop window, but was really watching to see if Noel turned round the corner of the street by a little bun shop, which was the nearest way to Mrs. Darrell's house.

The quick-witted little French maid took in the situation at a glance.

“Is it that Mademoiselle wishes to know where Monsieur is going ?” she said.

“Well, I am rather curious, Zélie,” replied Cora, after a moment’s look into her maid’s face.

“It is easy to find out. See, then. I have but to follow Monsieur. It is done.”

“But you must take care he does not see you, Zélie.”

“Do not be afraid, Mademoiselle. I shall take care of that. You see Monsieur Vanstone has turned round the corner. Now, then, I shall fly,” and Zélie walked rapidly down the street, and soon disappeared round the corner by the bun-shop. This street led out into another long narrow street, with white-washed cottages on either side. For to get to the Esplanade from the High Street, it was necessary to go through these little back ways.

Zélie glanced to the right and left. There he was walking down towards the cliff, as she expected. On she went, keeping close to the cottages, that he might not notice her if he turned round.

At the end of the street there were steps on the left, which led down to the sands, and on the right a row of houses, with a railed drive in front, and between this drive and the wall along the edge of the cliff was a narrow footway.

Down this Noel walked. Zélie saw him take his watch out, look at it, and then stand still and lean over the wall, watching the sea below.

“*Ciel!* it is an assignation, and he is yet too soon,” muttered the French maid, who was peeping round the corner by one of the houses.

In a few minutes Noel walked on, Zélie

following him slowly and cautiously, like a cat watching a mouse. At the end of the walk she also stopped, and appeared to look over the wall; but really she kept one eye on Noel, who soon turned into the gate at Breezelands.

“That, then, is the house,” exclaimed the French maid to herself. “Yes, he has entered; now to see the name.”

The name was on the gate. Zélie wrote it down, that she might be sure not to forget it, and sped back again to her mistress as fast as her quick little feet could carry her. Anything in the shape of an intrigue was what Zélie delighted in; she was in her element.

She found Cora walking up and down her own room in a restless state of impatience.

“Well, Zélie,” she exclaimed, as her maid entered, “did you see where Mr. Vanstone went to?”

“Yes; here is the name of the house, Mademoiselle;” and Zélie gave her young mistress the piece of paper, on which she had written the single word “Breezelands.”

“I thought as much,” exclaimed Cora, crushing the piece of paper in her hand; “it *was* Mrs. Darrell he was going to see.”

“Mrs. Darrell! she is married, then,” cried Zélie.

“She is a widow.”

“Oh! that is more difficult.”

“What do you mean?”

“It is possible Monsieur might marry her.”

“If he does, Zélie, I shall be ruined.”

“No, Mademoiselle, do not say that; there are plenty of others as handsome and good as Monsieur Vanstone, ready to adore a young lady as rich and beautiful as you are.”

“But you do not understand, Zélie. If

Mr. Vanstone marries I shall lose all my money."

"But how, then, is that, Mademoiselle?"

"My uncle, who is just dead, wished me to marry my cousin, Mr. Vanstone. If he marries me he will have all my uncle's money; but if Mr. Vanstone or myself marry any one else, the money will go at once to a strange gentleman. For the present, I have the money."

"I understand; but, then, Monsieur ought to marry you. It is too cruel; it is atrocious that he should think of any other. It must not be, Mademoiselle."

"No, he shall not marry her if I can help it, Zélie; but what can I do. She is beautiful, and he admires her."

"Mademoiselle, I will think. There is nothing that I would not do for you; and Mademoiselle is so good—so generous—I

know she would not refuse to give a little present, if all went as she wished."

"I do not see what there is that you can do, Zélie, but watch, and see what goes on when you have an opportunity, and be silent," she added with emphasis, as she put a five-pound note into Zélie's hand.

"Mademoiselle, I will find out all about Madame Darrell, I will watch her, something must be done, Mademoiselle must not lose her money. Who then is the strange gentleman?"

"His name is Captain Tristam."

"And where does he live?"

"He is at Penally with the regiment."

"Oh! then he too is against Mademoiselle, it is frightful."

"Why, what has *he* to do with it?"

"Does not Mademoiselle see, that he would without doubt wish Monsieur Vanstone to

marry Mrs. Darrell, because then he would get your money."

"Oh! I never thought of that."

"He will help him, he will praise him to Mrs. Darrell—never mind Mademoiselle, I will think of something to prevent such a misfortune. Has Mr. Vanstone a servant of his own?"

"No, I think not."

"He is at the Gate House now, is he not, Mademoiselle."

"Yes."

"Well, I will try what I can do. If Mademoiselle will trust me she shall be Madame Vanstone yet, or at least Monsieur shall not marry Madame Darrell. At present Mademoiselle must put on her new hat, and make herself look as charming as she can, and be gracious to Monsieur when he comes—pardon Zélie who adores you, Mademoiselle, but you must not let Monsieur Vanstone see

that you are jealous or angry—it must be that you hide all that"—

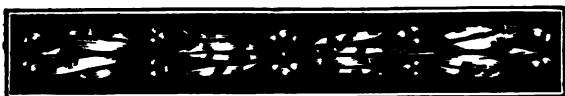
"There, Mademoiselle can surely wear this little white wrap round her shoulders driving, and permit me then to put a soupçon of rouge, Mademoiselle looks pale with anxiety. There, look in the mirror, is not that lovely, where are Monsieur's eyes if he does not admire—only smile—ah ! like that, and he is conquered ; Mademoiselle has too little confidence in herself and her beauty."

"Zélie, I think this hat *is* very becoming to me."

"Yes, Mademoiselle, it becomes you to perfection, be sure Monsieur will think so."

"I hope he will you little flatterer," said Cora laughing.

One thing the wily little French maid had at any rate succeeded in doing, that was putting her mistress into good humour.



CHAPTER XV.

UNCONSCIOUS of all the machinations of Cora and her French maid, Noel went into Mrs. Darrell's drawing-room. No one was there, but the servant took him through another door which he had never noticed before as it was partly hidden by a folding screen which stood in one corner of the drawing-room, and he found himself in a pretty room with a small conservatory on one side, out of which there was a door opening on to some steps, which led down into the garden, from which there was a private way down some rough steps cut in the rocks, to the sands below.

In the window was a devonport, at which

Mrs. Darrell was sitting writing, when Noel was shown into the room.

She put down her pen and rose to meet him.

“ Sit down here,” she said, pointing to an easy-chair in the window. “ This is my own little room, and no one ever comes in here without my special permission, so you need not fear interruption, but perhaps you have changed your mind since yesterday and would prefer to keep your secrets to yourself, Mr. Vanstone.”

“ No, Mrs. Darrell, but it is not much of a secret that I have to tell you, you know all the particulars of my uncle’s will, do you not ? ”

Mrs. Darrell put one elbow on the devonport, and leaning her chin on her hand looked up into Noel’s face, at that moment her eyes looked such a deep blue that they were nearly black.

“I am not sure that I do, let me hear them.”

Noel went through the whole will as carefully as Mr. Brandon himself had done, and then added,

“Before my late uncle made this will, which was only signed just before his death, I had distinctly told him that I would not marry my Cousin Cora, and I think he made this will in the hopes of driving me into a marriage with her, whether I would or no. When I heard the contents of the will, I felt that I must never marry and leave my Cousin Cora penniless, but it never entered my head that it could be possible for me to marry Cora. I find, however, that every one who hears the contents of my uncle’s will, seems to think that I ought to marry her, they say there is nothing else for me to do.”

Noel paused a moment, and Mrs. Darrell

still looking at him fixedly, said only one word.

“ Well ? ”

“ I want you to tell me what your opinion is, Mrs. Darrell ; do you think it would be right for me to marry Cora, even though I do not love her ? ”

Mrs. Darrell had remained quite still all the time Noel had been speaking, but as he said the last few words, her lips parted in a slight smile, she took her eyes away from his face and leant back in her lounging chair ; folded her white, well-shaped hands lightly together, and looked down at the cover of a closed book, which lay in her lap, in silence.

Noel waited wondering why she did not speak, was she thinking what to say ? A minute passed, another, then Maud slowly raised her eyes and looked at him, the smile still on her lips.

She was *not* thinking of an answer he felt sure, she was waiting for something, but what?

“Is there anything you wish me to tell you,” said Noel at last, a slight flush rising on his cheeks.

Once more Mrs. Darrell put her arm on the devonport.

“Noel Vanstone,” she said, “if you wish me to give an opinion on this you must tell me *all*. I do not wish to force your confidence,” she continued, before he could answer, rising as she spoke and leaning against the side of the open window, “far from that—but I can give you no opinion unless you trust me utterly,” and she looked at him and smiled.

As she stood in the window, the sunlight fell on her bright brown hair and tinted it with gold, and a branch of pink china roses

in full bloom, hung down over the window and cast flickering lights and shades over her face. She had on a dress of some soft white material trimmed with bows of two shades of pink.

For a moment Noel could think of nothing but the exceeding beauty of the woman before him. At last he spoke in a low voice still gazing at her,

“I felt at first that I could not marry my cousin, because I loved another girl, and hoped to make her my wife.”

Silence—only a look from Maud. The colour deepened on Noel’s face.

“She knew nothing of my affection for her, and all that is over now, but still”—he stopped and his colour vanished, and left him very pale.

“How long is that ago?” asked Mrs. Darrell.

Noel's lips quivered a little.

"Not quite a month ago."

"Do you mean me to understand, that your love for this girl has passed away?"

Silence.

"I have put the thought and the hope aside, that is past," he said at last still very pale.

Maud leaned forward a little and picked a china rose, in full bloom, then holding it before her face, softly blew on the rose—and the pink petals fell in a shower on her white dress.

"Vanished like that," she said looking up at him and smiling.

"I suppose so," said Noel flushing again.

Mrs. Darrell threw the rose stalk out of the window and returned to her seat.

"And now you are thinking of marrying your cousin," she said.

“ Oh ! no, no,” said Noel quickly, “ I only wished to hear what your opinion was.”

“ I see, and suppose I say, you decidedly ought to marry her—what then ? ”

“ I shall know what you think,” said Noel, after a moment’s hesitation.

“ And would go and propose to your cousin at once I suppose ? ”

“ I am not so sure of that.”

“ Do say what you mean, Mr. Vanstone,” said Mrs. Darrell sharply.

“ I do not think I could make up my mind all in a moment, but do you think it is my duty to do it ? ”

“ Perhaps she would not have you if you did ask her,” said Mrs. Darrell with an amused look.

“ Very likely not,” replied Noel laughing. Maud looked at him intently for a moment,

then she leant forward on the devonport again, and said gravely,

“ I am ready to give you my opinion now.”

“ And what is it, Mrs. Darrell ? ”

“ At the present time at any rate, you ought not to—ask your cousin to marry you—I cannot give you a more decided opinion as yet, because I have seen very little of Miss Stanley, but I by no means think as many women do, that a man ought never to marry a woman unless he loves her. I believe that very often the happiest marriages are those that have been entered into with no warmer feeling than mutual esteem and respect, but no marriage can be happy without that, a man ought never to marry a woman whom he does not like and cannot respect.”

“ But surely there ought to be love as well, Mrs. Darrell, you would not leave that out altogether would you ? ”

“No, but the roses are emblems of love,” she said looking out of the window, and then at Noel with a meaning smile.

The hot colour flew into Noel’s face. He went to the window and plucked a rosebud, and turning towards Mrs. Darrell, who was watching him, he held it out to her.

“You cannot blow that to pieces,” he said in a low tone.

She took it from his hand, and said very quietly, but with a decided blush,

“No, not until it is full blown, then it will doubtless fall to pieces as easily as the other.”

Maud rose as she spoke and walked across the room.

“Come and see my little conservatory, Mr. Vanstone, and if you like you can go out that way to the sands, the door is open.”

Noel felt himself dismissed, and so after looking at the flowers for a few minutes, he

said good-bye, but before he left he asked Mrs. Darrell if she would come to a picnic he was trying to get up.

“I think,” said Noel, “I shall have it the day after to-morrow, if you can come then.”

“I shall be very pleased to be one of the party,” said Maud; “I always enjoy a picnic. Where are you thinking of going?”

“To Manorbeer. Is there anywhere else you would like to go better? It is all the same to me, Mrs. Darrell.”

“No; I think Manorbeer is about the best place.”

Noel went down the steps into the garden and Maud stood at the open door of the conservatory and watched him.

“How he dislikes that cousin of his,” she thought, “and how astonished he was to find he had ceased to care for the other girl. What strange things men are. Why should he

ask for my opinion ? When had I said what he didn't like, he would not have thought of following my advice."

Then she went back into the room, and slowly picked up the petals of the rose she had scattered. "He never really loved her," she murmured, "or he would not have forgotten so soon ; he is not the man to love one day and forget the next," and, smiling, she put the rosebud he had given her in her dress.





CHAPTER XVI.

NOEL found that it was only three o'clock when he left Breezelands, but he went straight to Sker House, where Mrs. Lester and Cora lodged. On the way he did question himself as to whether it was indeed true he had ceased to care for Mabel. He had told Maud Darrell all *that* was over, but he had never known it was until she asked him the question. Certainly he could now think of Mabel and his disappointment without pain, but why he could scarcely say; he hardly knew what his own feelings were on the subject, but one thing he was quite certain about, and that was he had never seen anything so lovely as Mrs. Darrell had

looked standing in the window with that pink rose in her hand. Had she thought him fickle? *Was he fickle?*

Well, there was no time to answer the question now, for here he was at Sker House. He found Cora sitting in the drawing-room with her hat on, ready to start, and very pleased to see him arrive so soon. She sent to the stables to order the carriage to be brought round at once, and a very pretty little turn-out it was.

Noel handed her into the carriage, and took the wraps from Zélie, and was very attentive and polite.

“Now, Noel, you must take the reins to-day,” said Cora.

“Oh, no, you had better try them yourself, Corrie.”

But Corrie would have her way as usual, so Noel drove the ponies.

As they passed the entrance to the Croft they saw Captain Kingsgate, and Captain Tristam coming towards them. The two gentlemen stood and watched the ponies down the street.

“That looks bad for your prospects, Tristam,” said Captain Kingsgate; “little Miss Stanley looks very pretty, and very well satisfied to-day.”

“Oh, of course he will marry her,” said Jack. “I always thought he would; if you had seen what a fine old place Fryersdale Hall is, you would think so too.”

“I don’t know, I fancy that Vanstone doesn’t think much about that, and I think he is afraid of his cousin’s temper; my word, she did look savage the other night when he was playing chess with Mrs. Darrell. I think it is rather a case of, how ‘happy I could be with either were t’other dear charmer away’

with Vanstone just now ; he was very attentive to Mrs. Darrell the other night at our house."

" *Mrs. Darrell!*" exclaimed Tristam, " everybody is attentive to her ; but to think of marrying her, seems to me like a child's crying for the moon."

Captain Kingsgate laughed.

" She let Vanstone walk home with her the other night."

" You don't say so ; he's a lucky fellow."

Zélie was sitting in the window at Sker House, having a gossip with the parlour-maid Jane, and trying to find out everything she could about Mrs. Darrell. She saw the two gentlemen walk past.

" Who is that gentleman with Captain Kingsgate ?" she asked.

" Captain Tristam," replied Jane ; " one of the officers at Penally."

“ Do you know anything about him ; is he rich ? ”

“ I never heard that he was, but some one told me the other day that he was likely to come into some money soon.”

“ Ah ! ” exclaimed Zélie, and she put her head out of the window, and watched the gentlemen down the street.

“ So every one likes Mrs. Darrell,” she said to Jane, when they had gone out of sight.

“ Everybody.”

“ Who was her husband ? ”

“ I really do not know ; he died before she and her mother came here.”

“ Are you quite sure he *is* dead ? ”

“ Yes, of course he is ; whatever should make you think he is alive, Zélie ? . But the landlady, Mrs. Jones, knows all about him ;

her niece was maid to Mrs. Darrell before Mr. Darrell died."

"I will go down and have a little chat with Mrs. Jones. I want to know about Mrs. Darrell, she is so beautiful."

Mrs. Jones knew all about Mr. Darrel. She said he was quite an old man, and very rich, and it was said that Miss St. Clare, as she was then, had married him to save her father from ruin, he having lost all his money in some mines, or something of that kind.

"He only lived two years after they were married," said Mrs. Jones, "but my niece Mary said he was very fond of his beautiful wife, and she was very good to him. She is a sweet dear thing, and everybody loves her."

"I know one who loves her not," thought

Lester ; she thought the poor old lady seemed lonely.

Just as she was at last rising to go away, the carriage returned with Cora and Noel.

“ Madame Darrell is in the drawing-room, Mademoiselle,” said Zélie in a low tone as Cora came in. “ I will bring tea directly. Is Monsieur coming in ? ”

Cora turned to Noel.

“ Come in and have a cup of afternoon tea,” she said, “ Mrs. Darrell is in the drawing-room.”

They both went upstairs, and Maud was persuaded to sit down and wait for the tea, which Zélie soon brought up on a pretty little tray, and handed it round, listening to all that was said, and watching out of the corner of her sharp black eyes every admiring glance of Noel’s, and every change in Maud’s fair face.



Zélie as she went back into the dining-room, and sat down in the window again with her sewing. "They will believe nothing against her; it is useless," she thought. "There is but one way, one thing then to be done; it is to destroy her beauty. But how? I must then think. Vitriol! But no, it would be discovered; I dare not. Ah! I have it! That will do! If Mademoiselle Cora will only be willing, if she be not afraid, it shall be done. The door bell, that is; yes, and I do believe it is Madame Darrell herself. Jane, I will answer the door."

"No, madam, Miss Stanley is not at home, but Mrs. Lester is in the drawing-room. What name shall I say?"

"Mrs. Darrell," said Maud, giving her card, and Zélie showed her into the drawing-room.

Maud stayed some time chatting to Mrs.

Lester ; she thought the poor old lady seemed lonely.

Just as she was at last rising to go away, the carriage returned with Cora and Noel.

“ Madame Darrell is in the drawing-room, Mademoiselle,” said Zélie in a low tone as Cora came in. “ I will bring tea directly. Is Monsieur coming in ? ”

Cora turned to Noel.

“ Come in and have a cup of afternoon tea,” she said, “ Mrs. Darrell is in the drawing-room.”

They both went upstairs, and Maud was persuaded to sit down and wait for the tea, which Zélie soon brought up on a pretty little tray, and handed it round, listening to all that was said, and watching out of the corner of her sharp black eyes every admiring glance of Noel’s, and every change in Maud’s fair face.

“Really I must go now,” said Maud, rising; “I have paid such a long visit. I have been here half an hour, Miss Stanley, talking to your aunt.”

“And I enjoyed the chat so much,” said Mrs. Lester; “it has done me so much good; I was feeling very dull before you came.”

Noel went down to the door with Mrs. Darrell, and then returned to the drawing-room.

“I have fixed the day after to-morrow for the picnic, Corrie,” he said. “Will you drive Mrs. Lester?”

“I cannot go to a picnic, my dear Noel. I should take cold. I would much rather stay at home,” said Mrs. Lester.

“Well, who will you take, then, with you, Cora? I am going to have a drag, and Mrs. Darrell, the Kingsgates, and their visitors are

coming, and I shall call and pick up some of the officers on our way through Penally."

Cora felt very angry for a moment, to think that Mrs. Darrell should go with Noel in the drag, while she had to drive in her pony-carriage. Suddenly a happy thought struck her, and she said—

"I will ask Mrs. Darrell to drive with me ; then there will be plenty of room in the drag, Noel."

It must be confessed that Noel felt a little disappointed that he should not have Mrs. Darrell in the drag ; but he said—"Very well, do," with the best grace he could. So Cora wrote a little note, offering Mrs. Darrell a seat in her pony-carriage, to the picnic on Thursday, and received an answer to say she would be very pleased to accept the offer.

"Mademoiselle," said Zélie, when Cora

went up into her room to take off her hat—“I have asked all particulars about Madame Darrell; there is nothing against her, alas! nothing at all! So there is but one thing to do.”

“What is that?”

“To make her cease to be beautiful.”

“Oh, Zélie! what do you mean?”

“If Mademoiselle will ask Madame Darrell to take a cup of afternoon tea with her, some day when she is alone. I will bring the tea, and into Madame’s cup I will put what will make her face to come all over with little spots. She will be so ugly she will stay at home; will not let herself be seen; and Monsieur will return to his first love, to Mademoiselle.”

“But that is too dreadful, Zélie. Oh! do not say such things to me. It is horrible!”

“But, Mademoiselle, it would only be for a

time. I do not kill. It is nothing ! for the moment only, to give Mademoiselle time to make Monsieur think less of Madame Darrell."

" Oh ! Zélie, Zélie ! do not talk about it. I will not allow it. It cannot be ; " and Cora ran down stairs pale with fear, almost terror, at the thought.

But Zélie, watching her, only shrugged her shoulders, and said—" Wait a little bit."





CHAPTER XVII.

ORA STANLEY'S pretty new carriage and pair of ponies was driven several times through the streets of Tenby the morning of the picnic. First Richards drove Mrs. Lester to spend the day with Mrs. Darrell's mother. Mrs. St. Clare then returned to fetch a workbag that she had forgotten. Finally, Cora drove down herself to fetch Mrs. Darrell, who looked charming in a blue sateen dress, trimmed with white lace, and a white lace hat. Back they came again, with many admiring eyes following them round by the Gate-House, where Noel Vanstone's drag was standing, and stopped again for a few minutes at Sker House, for Zélie to fetch

a dust-wrap for Cora. As they were waiting the drag passed them, Noel himself handling the reins.

“Just going for the Kingsgates ; shall be after you directly,” he shouted, as he passed them.

“We shall be there first,” called Cora back ; and whipping up the ponies, she drove down the hill and round the corner into the Penally road, at a pace that made Mrs. Darrell, though not a nervous person, doubt if they should arrive at Manorbeer in safety. It was evident that, as Mr. Blount had said, Cora had “no more idea of driving than a pig.”

As yet, however, there was little to fear ; the road was fairly wide and straight ; but soon they came to the narrow lanes by Penally. “Surely,” thought Maud, “she will pull them in a little here. She never means to drive at this rate through the narrow road beyond ;”

but on they went, faster, if anything, than ever. At last Maud could keep silent no longer.

“Excuse me, Miss Stanley, but if we meet anything here it will be impossible to pass without backing to a gate. You do not know these roads so well as I do. Please, don’t drive so fast.”

As Maud said the last words, the groom suddenly leant forward, took hold of the reins, and nearly pulled the little ponies on their haunches—only just in time to save them from running right into a cart that was before them.

The ponies swerved, two of the wheels of the carriage went up the bank, and Maud Darrell was thrown out on the opposite side of the road. All this happened in a few seconds.

Cora, who was much shaken and very

frightened, jumped out. The man with the cart took hold of the ponies, and the groom went to look after Mrs. Darrell; but at this moment they heard the sound of wheels coming behind them. The groom shouted, the noise ceased, and in another minute Noel Vanstone and Captain Tristam came running up.

Mrs. Darrell had raised herself, and was sitting on the bank. Cora went up to her—“I hope you are not hurt,” she said. “I am very sorry I was so careless.”

“I am not hurt in the least,” replied Maud, but she looked very pale.

“Are you sure?” said Noel, leaning over her, and speaking in a low voice.

“Quite, I fell on this soft bank, and all the damage done is, that I have soiled my dress and crushed my hat a little, pray do not make a fuss, go and help them back the

carriage to the gate, Mr. Vanstone, I am not a bit more hurt than Miss Stanley is."

They succeeded after much difficulty in getting the cart past the pony carriage and the drag.

"Tristam," said Noel, "will you drive my cousin on to Manorbeer. I think she had better not drive herself now, and we will take Mrs. Darrell in the drag."

"Oh, with pleasure," said Jack.

"Miss Stanley, will you trust yourself to me?" and Jack took the reins. Cora felt there was nothing for it but to submit with the best grace she could to this arrangement, but her heart was full of bitterness and jealousy, as she saw how tenderly Mrs. Darrell was helped into the drag by Noel.

"I believe she fell out of the carriage on purpose to be made a fuss over," she muttered to herself.

“What did you say?” asked Jack.

“I was afraid Mrs. Darrell had spoilt her hat.”

“Well, it doesn’t much matter,” said Jack, “she would look well if she had an old tin kettle on her head,” an observation which did not tend to improve Cora’s temper. Jack saw how cross she looked. “She’s in a devil of a wax,” thought he, “about it all, I must try and put her in a good humour.”

“Who are those two girls in brown hats in the drag?” asked Cora.

“Two Miss Lanes, they live next door to the Kingsgates, and are great friends of theirs.”

“What is there to be seen and done at Manorbeer, Captain Tristam?”

“Oh, the castle and sands, and all that sort of thing,” replied Jack.

“What are we all to do with ourselves after dinner?”

“Walk about the sands and spoon, that’s what one usually does at a picnic, is it not?”

“Oh, that’s all very well for you, but what am I to do?” said Cora, laughing.

“What’s to prevent your doing the same?”

“It takes two people to spoon.”

“Well, you have your choose, Miss Stanley, there’s Dennis, and Blount, and Vanstone, and young Lane, and last not least, of course, your humble servant, Jack Tristam; which will you have for a picnic spoon?”

“Which would you prefer I should take, Captain Tristam?”

“Why, Miss Stanley, surely there is but one answer I can make to that.”

Cora laughed.

“ Well, we shall see,” she said, “ you are a most absurd man.”

“ Would Vanstone be very angry with me, eh ? ”

“ Why should he,” said Cora, with a rather heightened colour, “ don’t talk nonsense, Captain Tristam,” but Jack saw that his nonsense had put her into a good humour again.

When they arrived at Manorbeer, Noel Vanstone, as he assisted Mrs. Darrell out of the drag, said—

“ You look *so* white, I feel sure you are more shaken than you will allow.”

“ It has given me a little headache, but I daresay it will go off by-and-bye.”

“ I am so very sorry my cousin should have driven you, she is not used to it, I think.”

“Those narrow roads are very dangerous,” said Mrs. Darrell, “I wonder there are not more accidents. Are we going to have luncheon in the castle ruins, Mr. Vanstone?”

“Yes, you must show me the best place, please, I have never been here before, you know.”

They had a very merry luncheon, Cora laughed and flirted with Major Dennis, and Captain Tristam, and appeared to be not at all the worse for her fright, but Noel felt sure that Mrs. Darrell did not feel well, although she talked and made herself very pleasant.

When they all dispersed after luncheon to go down to the sands, he went up to her and said—

“Mrs. Darrell, would not you rather be spared that long hot walk to the sea, and

stay and sit quietly in the shade under the ruins?"

"Well, to tell you the truth, I would," replied Maud. "Do not say anything to anybody, Mr. Vanstone; go down with the rest, perhaps I shall not be missed."

"Of course no one will miss you," said Noel, smiling at her, "let me find you a nice place to sit in the shade, then I will do as you wish."

"You forget I know these ruins better than you do, I will show you a comfortable nook," so they both went up the tower steps, Noel carrying some shawls.

"There now," said Mrs. Darrell, when they reached the top of the tower, "could anything be better than this, it is nice and cool here, and I shall be able to watch you all go down to the sands."

“Is there anything else I can get for you?” asked Noel, “before I go.”

“No, I want nothing else, thank you very much, Mr. Vanstone.”

“Except quiet,” said Noel, smiling. “I will see that you are not disturbed,” saying this he left her, and returned to the rest of the party, who were already wending their way on the road to the sands and sea.

“Now don’t forget, Miss Stanley,” said Jack Tristam to Cora, “oh, I am afraid I am too late,” he added, as Major Dennis came up, carrying her parasol.

“What does he mean?” said Major Dennis.

“Oh, I don’t know, he is most absurd to-day, he made me laugh all the way here. Captain Tristam?”

“Miss Stanley!”

“Will you show me the way over those cliffs?”

“ I shall be charmed,” said Jack, laughing.
“ Bowled out,” he said aside to Major Dennis, as he took the parasol from him.

The Major shrugged his shoulders.

“ Where is Mrs. Darrell ? ” he asked.

“ I think she is tired and has remained at the castle,” said Cora. “ She will be all right when she has had a rest, I daresay, I feel quite shaken myself, but it is a good thing it was not worse. I shall not drive at that pace in the Penally roads again.”

“ No, I wouldn’t, you might kill yourself next time,” said Jack.

“ You would not be sorry perhaps, if I did, Captain Tristam, you would get all the money then.”

“ Miss Stanley, I hope you don’t give me credit for such thoughts as those,” said Jack, turning round and looking at her. “ I hope I

shall never have that money, and I do not for a moment believe I shall."

Most sincerely did Cora join in that hope of Jack Tristam's, but she did not say so, she only stopped for a moment to look back at the party on the sands, Noel was still there, and seeing this she went round the cliff, and walked on with Jack in high spirits and perfect good-humour.





CHAPTER XVIII.

DOR more than an hour Noel wandered about with the rest, but at last, when they were amusing themselves in shying stones at a little pyramid of pebbles they had erected on the sands, he stole away unseen, and hurried back to the castle, where he rummaged in the hamper for a little coffee-machine he had brought, put some coffee in it, and, taking some matches, spirit of wine, &c., to prepare it on the tower, and a cup and saucer, he put all on a tray, and carried it himself up to where he had left Mrs. Darrel. He had some difficulty in getting up the steep narrow steps, and when he reached the top he thought at first Mrs. Darrell had

gone ; but in a few minutes he caught sight of her. She was sitting in the corner of the turret, a red shawl under her head, which was leaning against the broken moss-covered wall ; her white sunshade and hat lay on the grass beside her ; in one hand she held loosely an open Chinese fan.

Hot and weary with the summer breeze blowing softly over her, and the drowsy buzz of the bees in the wallflowers around her humming in her ears, Maud Darrell had closed her eyes and fallen asleep.

Noel put down his tray on the grass, and sat down on the wall beside her. She slept on. Noel took the fan softly out of her hand, and waved it to and fro, keeping the flies from teasing her. The movement of the fan ruffled the soft wavy hair over her temples, and blew about a spray of ivy, making it tap against her chin. Noel stooped,

and gently pushed it aside. In doing so his hand touched her cheek. He looked down into the lovely face so close to him. His hand lingered on the spray, and there came back to his memory some lines of Tennyson's on the sleeping beauty, which he had read long ago, and he said them aloud in a soft voice—

O eyes long laid in happy sleep!
O happy sleep that lightly fled!
O happy kiss that woke thy sleep!
O love, thy kiss would wake the dead!

“What a fool I am,” he murmured, brushing back the piece of ivy and turning away. “She would never look at me again if she knew I had ever dared to think of such a thing.”

He walked across to the other side of the tower, and, leaning over, gazed at the scene before him. On the left lay the little village of Manorbeer and the low Welsh hills, on the

right in the distance the deep blue sea, and above him a sky that was bluer still. He could not get that poem of Tennyson's out of his head.

And o'er the hills and far away,
 Beyond their utmost purple rim,
Beyond the night, across the day,
 Through all the world she followed him,

he repeated, then turning looked again at Maud. She had not moved. He went back to his old seat beside her, and took up the fan again. As he did so her lips parted in a slight smile. "She is dreaming," he thought, "but of what? of whom?" He began to wish she would wake and speak to him. The shadows lengthened, the afternoon wore on, and still she slept.

The piece of ivy escaped again. He knelt down, and this time broke the tendril off, and fastened it in his coat.

Once more he looked down into Maud's

face. "Would she wake? Would she ever forgive me if I did?" he thought. He leant down a little nearer, until he could feel her breath upon his cheek.

At that moment voices broke the silence. He started up almost guiltily, and looked over the tower. It was only some Welsh women on the road beneath, going to milk the little black cows he had seen eating the grass near the little stream leading down to the sands. This was all he saw, but not all he *might* have seen. While he was kneeling down looking into Maud's face, a woman had peeped through the doorway at the top of the tower steps, whose face had grown white with anger as her eyes rested on the scene before her, and who, drawing back as Noel rose to look over the battlement at the Welsh women, clenched her small white hands, and thought "I will have no pity; I will not spare her

now;" then turned, and without another look went down the tower steps.

For a few minutes Noel watched the women walking down the road, with their milk-cans on their heads. Then he felt a hand laid on his arm, and a clear sweet voice said—"Mr. Vanstone, how long have you been here?"

Noel turned round with a smile, and rather a mischievous look in his eyes.

"Really, I don't know, Mrs. Darrell."

"I have been asleep, have I not?"

"You know best," he said, laughing. "As a rule, no one ever admits having had a nap in the day-time."

"Suppose I was *not* asleep," she said, looking straight into Noel's face.

"If you were awake you can tell me what piece of poetry I repeated just now," he said, laughing. "I am sure I said it loud enough

for you to hear. Let me make you some coffee, Mrs. Darrell."

"Thank you, Mr. Vanstone, I should like a cup of coffee very much. But what was the piece of poetry? I did not hear it. I suppose I was asleep."

"Probably you were," he said, as he put the spirits of wine round the coffee-pot, and set light to it.

"Do you know, Mr. Vanstone," said Maud, sitting down on the old wall, and wrapping a soft white shawl round her shoulders, "that you are exciting my curiosity?"

"Yes," said Noel, still laughing, and watching the coffee-pot.

"You will have to tell me, Mr. Vanstone."

"As you please, Mrs. Darrell."

"Well?"

"I will tell you where you will find the lines."

“Where?”

“In a poem of Tennyson’s, called ‘The Sleeping Beauty.’ It is, I think, divided into several parts, and the verse I repeated was in a part called ‘The Departure,’ and, if I remember right the third verse begins”—

“Give me my cup of coffee,” interrupted Maud, hastily; “I did not think, Mr. Vanstone that you would”—

“That I would *what?*” said Noel, quietly, giving her the coffee, with his eyes fixed on the cup, but the corners of his mouth twitching with an effort to suppress a laugh.

She took the cup in silence, and Noel sat down on the wall beside her. Maud lifted her eyes, and looked him straight in the face. He met the look calmly and gravely. He was glad in that moment that he had not yielded to the temptation and kissed her; for had he done so, he knew his eyes would

have betrayed him now. As it was, she smiled at him—those honest, straightforward eyes of his had told her all she wanted to know.

“ Well,” he said, after a moment, “ I repeated the lines, *that was all*. Is there anything more you want to know ? ”

“ No, thank you, Mr. Vanstone. I am quite satisfied, and this coffee is delicious ; but do tell me what the time is, my watch did not like that fall out of the carriage, I suppose, for it has stopped.”

“ It is five o’clock.”

“ Five o’clock ! ” exclaimed Maud. “ Why, where are the others ? ”

“ I have not the remotest idea,” said Noel. “ When last I saw them they were engaged in the intellectual amusement of shying stones at a heap of pebbles on the sea-shore, and Dennis was making bets on the throws.”

Maud laughed. “ Let us go down and see

if they are come back, Mr. Vanstone. It is really very rude of you to neglect your guests like this."

"All right, Mrs. Darrell. I think I hear voices. Can you carry the shawls, if I carry the tray?"

"You will never get down those steps with all those things," said Maud.

"I mean to try," said Noel; and he went down, Maud following; but she proved right. Just as they reached the middle of the staircase Noel slipped a little on a step which was partly worn away. He managed to save himself, but the tray and all its contents went tumbling down with a tremendous rattle.

"Holloa!" called out Captain Kingsgate.
"What in the world is that row?"

"It's Mr. Vanstone playing at skittles with his coffee-pot and coffee-cups," called out Maud, laughing.

“Come and help pick up the pieces, Kingsgate,” said Noel, “Mrs. Darrell cannot get by.”

If Noel had let the tray fall on purpose, he couldn’t have done a better thing to divert attention from himself and Mrs. Darrell, for the incident caused so much fun and laughter, that no one had time to wonder how long they had been up on the tower together. One person only did not laugh, she stood back and looked at it all, with a face white with anger, and a heart full of evil thoughts and plans.

“Major Dennis, will you be kind enough to tell Richards to put the ponies to, I have a dreadful headache and shall return at once.”

“But, Miss Stanley, you will have some tea first, it is nearly ready.”

“No; thank you, do not say anything to the others, but order my carriage at once,

and when I am gone, you can explain to my cousin."

Major Dennis did as he was told, and then went down with Cora to the village, where the carriages were put up, and saw her off.

"Has no more a headache than I have," said he to himself as he went back, "it is nothing but a fit of temper."

The rest of the party had their tea, and then drove home in the lovely summer evening, having as they all said enjoyed the day immensely.

Noel drove Mrs. Darrell to Breezelands, and brought Mrs. Lester back to Sker House.

She did not know that Cora had returned.

Noel waited to hear how his cousin was, Zélie came to the door and informed him, that Mademoiselle Cora was very poorly indeed, and had gone to bed with a dreadful headache.

“I am very sorry,” said Noel, “I am afraid it was that unfortunate accident this morning.”

“Yes Monsieur, no doubt,” said Zélie, and shut the door.





CHAPTER XIX.

TENBY was filling fast, the band played every evening, either on the Croft, Castle Hill, or Esplanade, and on the sands in the morning. The bathing season had commenced in earnest, and visitors scrambled and politely wrangled for machines. Young ladies lolled about the rocks, in what they imagined to be elegant attitudes, dressed in seaside costumes of the most startling description, whilst idle young gentlemen stood about the sands and looked at them through opera-glasses, as if they were a species of marine curiosity they had never seen before. Children and wooden spades could as yet

only be counted by dozens, as the schools and colleges had not as yet broken up. Morning was the favourite time for the sands, but often in the afternoon and evening, the Castle Hill, and St. Catherine's Rock were sought after as shady and cool retreats to sit and read, work, and, better still, to have a quiet flirtation, and it was not until the afternoon that the officers could get over from Pembroke Dock, or Penally, as they were generally on duty in the morning.

About six o'clock in the evening, a few days after Noel Vanstone's picnic, he and Captain Kingsgate were standing on the Castle Hill looking over the low wall at the people on the sands, Captain Tristam was walking up and down with the two Lane girls, and Blount and two other gentlemen were sitting on one of the seats at the top of the Hill, talking to Mrs. Darrell and her

mother, St. Catherine's was not yet surrounded, but the tide was coming in fast.

"Where is Dennis," said Captain Kingsgate to Noel.

"He has taken my Cousin Cora up to see the fort on St. Catherine's."

"They had better look sharp and come down then," said Captain Kingsgate, "in another ten minutes St. Catherine's will be an island."

"There are a good many people about the rocks still, Kingsgate, and the sea has not reached that little pool at the side."

"It has *now*," replied Captain Kingsgate pointing his stick towards the rock.

"I say, Vanstone," said Captain Tristam coming up to them, "those two will be caught if they don't come down directly—what can they be about?"

“How long will it be now, Kingsgate, before the sea meets?” asked Noel.

“Five minutes at the outside,” replied Kingsgate.

The news spread that some one was on the rock, and a little group formed round the wall, at last Noel cried out,

“There they are!” and two figures were seen appearing at the top of the rock.

“Now if they look sharp, they may do it without wetting above their ankles,” said Kingsgate.

But the two that were being so eagerly watched from the Hill, did not seem aware at first that the tide was so far up, but after they had come down about half-way the Major suddenly turned round towards Cora, and then both commenced running down the steps as fast as possible.

At this moment the water met round the rock.

“It will be over their boots,” said Captain Kingsgate laughing.

They were at the bottom of the steps now, but there they came to a stand.

“What are they waiting for now,” exclaimed Noel.

“Dennis is taking off his boots,” exclaimed Jack Tristam.

“Why by the time he has done that, it will be up to their knees,” said Captain Kingsgate.

“I believe he is going to carry her over,” said Jack laughing.

All this time Major Dennis was taking off his socks and boots, tucking up his trousers above his knees, then tying his boots together by the laces, and putting his socks inside them, he slung them round his neck.

Cora appeared to be standing regarding the gradually increasing gulf with great calmness.

Having completed his arrangements for getting over without wetting any portion of his garments, Major Dennis advanced towards Cora put his arm round her waist, and lifting her off the ground tucked her under his arm. Held like this she presented a most ridiculous appearance, and her feet were not very far from the water.

The party on the Hill went into shouts of laughter.

“ Oh really it is quite *too* awfully ridiculous,” said the eldest Miss Lane.

In went Major Dennis with a splash, evidently the water was deeper than he expected.

“ It’s above his ankles ! ”

“ Oh ! it’s nearly to his knees ! ”

“ I told you so ! ”

“ She will get her feet wet ! ”

“ No, she is tucking them up.”

“ Look ! look ! by Jove, she’s knocked his
boots over into the water with her head ! ”

“ He will drop her ! ”

“ They are over ! ”

“ Hurrah ! ”

“ Hurrah ! ”

“ Hurrah ! ”

“ Let’s go down and help fish for Dandy
Dennis’s boots.”

They found poor Major Dennis, dolefully
feeling about with his stick in the water for
his boots, and Cora standing by looking very
cross. She was quite conscious that she had
been made to look ridiculous, and resented it.

“ Here they are,” said the Major at last,
stooping and picking up his dripping boots.

Now be it known that Major Dennis had
small feet, of which he was rather vain, and

was very particular about his boots, as indeed he was about his whole dress, which had earned him the nick-name of Dandy Dennis, and this knowledge and the piteous spectacle that his patent boots presented when they were placed on the sands made it impossible for his brother officers to keep from laughing.

“ You had better sit down on the steps leading up to the Castle Hill, while I run home for some socks and boots for you,” said Captain Kingsgate.

Now Captain Kingsgate was a big man, and had large feet, so this offer of his only caused a fresh burst of laughter.

“ I should think it would be much better to wring out his socks and put them, and his own boots on,” said Cora, “ salt water does not give cold.”

This sally produced more amusement.

“ I believe Miss Stanley is right,” said

Dennis commencing to wring out his socks, holding them at arm's length to prevent wetting his clothes.

"Dennis, you will be the death of me," said Jack Tristam, who was holding his sides with laughter.

"It's all very well for you fellows to laugh," said the Major.

"By Jove, Dennis, I am awfully sorry for you," said Jack, "but I cannot help laughing."

"My dear fellow, I don't mind in the least, if only you would get me some dry socks and boots."

"I think Mr. Vanstone has gone for some," said Maud Darrell, who with some other ladies had just joined the group round Dennis.

Cora looked round sharply. Why should Maud Darrell know that he had gone to fetch the socks, she thought.

“Are you wet at all?” said Maud to Cora.

“No, I will go up the Hill now, I see the band has come.”

Maud turned and walked back with her. In a few minutes Noel ran past them at full speed, with the socks and boots in his hand.

“It was very good-natured of him to go and fetch them,” said Mrs. Darrell.

“Oh yes, very,” said Cora, shortly.

Major Dennis was very thankful for the dry socks, and boots, which fitted him so well, that he went up on the Castle Hill with the others, and walked about as if nothing had happened.

“I am afraid Major Dennis made me look a great goose, carrying me across like that,” said Cora to Noel, who was standing by her, as she sat on the low wall listening to the band.

“ Oh, it was Dennis they were laughing at, not you, Corrie, it was not your fault, but I am sorry it should have happened, if it has vexed you,” he added, kindly.

He stood and talked a little while with her and then went over to the other side of the Hill, where Cora had seen Mrs. Darrell a few minutes before.

“ Gone to her again,” thought she, “ I can bear this no longer. Yes, there they come round the Hill, he is going to walk home with them. I shall go and speak to Zélie, I will ask Maud Darrell to tea with me to-morrow if I can possibly get a chance of doing so. Captain Tristam, I am going home. Good-bye.”

“ Let me walk round the Hill with you, Miss Stanley, but it is a beautiful evening, must you go home so soon ? ”

“ Yes. I think I did get my feet a little

wet, and I feel that I must have looked so silly."

"Oh, no! the fellows were laughing at Dennis—Vanstone was awfully vexed about it, I think, although he did not say much."

"Was he?"

Jack said good-bye to Cora at the turnstile leading out of the Castle Hill.

"Upon my word," he thought, "it is rather too bad that Vanstone will take such a lot of notice, and pay so much attention to Mrs. Darrell. If he is going to marry Miss Stanley, which I suppose he is, he ought to pay her a little more attention. It's a pity the old fellow did not leave him to do as he chose. Perhaps he would have cared more about her then."





CHAPTER XX.

NOEL had, as Cora suspected, walked home with Mrs. Darrell and her mother. When they reached the door at Breezelands, Mrs. St. Clare said good-evening to him and went up the steps, but Maud turned to him, and said—

“Mr. Vanstone, you asked my opinion the other day about something. Since then I have observed several little things which make me think, you are, quite unintentionally I am sure, not behaving fairly to your cousin, Miss Stanley. As your friend, I tell you this; if you wish me to explain, I will, but that rests with you.”

“I shall be very much obliged to you if

you will tell me, Mrs. Darrell, in what way you think I am not behaving well to Cora."

"Come through the garden on to the sands, Mr. Vanstone, and I will explain what I mean."

There was still a little strip of sand between the rock steps and the sea, and up and down this the two walked.

"You told me the other day, Mr. Vanstone, that you had been surprised to find that so many of your friends seemed to expect, that as a matter of course after the will your uncle had left, you would marry your Cousin Cora."

"Yes," said Noel.

"Has it ever occurred to you that your cousin herself might be under the same impression?"

Noel started.

"No, I never thought of that."

“Have you, since your uncle’s death, said anything to her which would be likely to show her, you had no intention of carrying out his wishes?”

“Not directly. If I remember right I said something to her on the evening of my uncle’s funeral, which I think must have implied that I was not intending to ask her to be my wife.”

As he spoke Noel remembered with dismay, Cora’s anger that night, and her saying that she thought he was treating her very badly.

“Did she know anything of your affections for the other young lady?”

“Oh, no.”

“Then do you not think it very natural, that knowing that by marrying her, you would come into all your uncle’s property, she would think it quite possible that you

might wish to conform to your uncle's desire, and ask her to be your wife?"

"I see that it is possible now, Mrs. Darrell, I never thought so before."

"I fancy you are not in the habit of analysing your own feelings, or the feelings, and probable motives of others, are you, Mr. Vanstone?"

"Well no, I do not think I am. Do you think I ought to have referred to my uncle's will, and told my cousin plainly that I should not carry out his wishes. It would have been rather an awkward thing to do," and Noel looked into Mrs. Darrell's face, and smiled.

"It was a great deal more awkward for her to be left in doubt as to what your intentions were, and probably to be in doubt still."

“Mrs. Darrell, if I have never spoken plainly as to my not being willing to marry Cora, I have I am certain, never in any way led her to think I had any intention of doing so.”

“I can quite believe that, but you do not seem to see, that this will of your uncle's has made it almost necessary for you to have some explanation with your cousin on the subject. I think she has a right to expect it, and it is due to her that you should give it her.”

“Then I will certainly do so at once, Mrs. Darrell, but I honestly believe that Cora does not care any more for me than I do for her.”

“Oh, that's another point altogether, and I sincerely hope you are right, but none the less do I think, that placed in the position Miss Stanley is, by the will, it is very

likely that if you had asked her to marry you, she would have accepted you, and that she has expected you to do so. You see if you marry any one else, she will lose all her income, and that is not a pleasant thing for her to look forward to."

"But then I shall not marry," exclaimed Noel.

"But she does not know that, does she?"

"True, but she shall know it. I see now I ought at any rate to have explained my feelings about that."

Maud stopped, and turned round towards Noel with a very grave earnest face.

"Mr. Vanstone, let me entreat you to think well, before you make your cousin such a promise as that. I honour you greatly for the kind, unselfish, generous feeling which makes you desire to make this promise, and to be willing to fulfil it; but do pray think

of all that it may involve, and whether you are quite justified for the sake of others, besides your cousin, in binding yourself in this way? Supposing that you were to marry, what would happen, Miss Stanley would lose this income, but would she be reduced to poverty? Is it not likely, that she would remain with her aunt, and enjoy almost as many luxuries as she cares for. Is it not likely that when her aunt Mrs. Lester dies, she would leave her her money, and to whom would your uncle's money go? To Jack Tristam; one of the most kind-hearted, good fellows that ever lived, who, poor fellow, is always hard up, and though he would make the best of husbands, is as about as little likely to be able to marry as any poor man can be."

"Mrs. Darrell, I never thought of it in that light."

“ Mr. Vanstone, you would make a very bad barrister, you only look at things from one point of view. Now, you know what it is to have to give up the thought of marrying a woman you love, but you have yet to learn what it would be to say ‘ Good-bye ’ to a woman whom you loved, *and who loved you*. If the girl you told me of had loved you, if to give her up would have brought pain and misery on *her*, would you have sacrificed her, in order that a girl, you did not care for, should have a few thousands a year that she scarcely knew how to spend ? ”

“ No ! no ! I could not have done that.”

“ Then whatever your present intentions are, do not be induced to make any *promise* to your cousin that you will never marry, and deprive her of her money. In your own mind you may feel sure that you will so act, but do not bind yourself. Mr. Vanstone, I am

Meanwhile Noel walked back to his hotel ; it was a lovely summer evening, and there were many people about whom he had to stop and speak to, so that he had not much time to think, but when he reached the hotel he hesitated whether he should go on and talk to Cora at once, but, on looking at his watch, he saw that it was their dinner hour, so he put it off to the next day.

“ What I shall say to her,” thought he, “ I have not the slightest notion, but I can see that Mrs. Darrell is right. How good it was of her to trouble about it.” Then came the sudden thought, “ Could it be that she cared, that his giving that promise not to marry would have been pain to *her*.”

The next moment he put the thought from him ; she had said, “ Whatever you may think of me.” She had perhaps feared he might think this ; it was not fair to her to

take for granted any such feeling had prompted the advice she had given him. That it was wise and good advice was plain to him now; he would act upon it to-morrow.

Cora was not at dinner; could he have looked into Sker House, he would have seen Zélie holding close to her mistress a little cedar box containing a small open packet of yellowish-looking powder.

“That is it, Mademoiselle.”

“It shall be to-morrow,” said Cora, raising her white face from looking into the box, “but, Zélie, you are sure it can do no permanent harm?”

“No! no! Mademoiselle, only for a month or so; long enough for our purpose—have no fear.”

“To-morrow afternoon, Zélie, you shall go down to the gateway on the South Cliff and

watch until you see her come out, then let me know, and I will meet her in the street and ask her to tea. You will do the rest; put *it* in the cup with the pink handle."

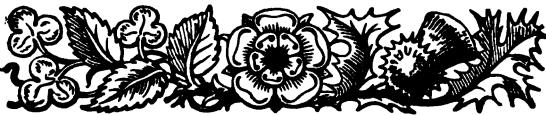
"Very well, Mademoiselle."

"I shall not forget what you have done for me, Zélie."

"Mademoiselle is very good."

Cora left the room to go down to dinner, but she ate little, and spent nearly the whole night walking up and down her room. She had made up her mind that this thing should be done, but she was not so hardened nor so thoroughly bad as not to feel the wickedness and meanness of the act she was about to commit.

"It is horrible," she said to herself, over and over again, "but what can I do, and Zélie said it is only for a time—perhaps it will make her less vain, and do her good in the end."



CHAPTER XXI.

IT was a hot, sultry afternoon, and Zélie found little difficulty in watching the door of Breezelands unobserved, for few people were out on account of the heat. It was three o'clock when she first took up her stand under the shade of the old gateway, and it was past four when at last Maud Darrell came out of the house, and walked towards the town. Zélie had changed her place of watching and waiting many times during that hour, but never once allowed the road in front of Breezelands to be out of her sight, and no sooner did she see Mrs. Darrell than she ran as fast as she could, regardless of the heat, down by the old city wall, to her

mistress, who, with her hat on, was waiting in the dining-room, her head aching, and her heart beating with fear and dread, yet determined on her horrible project still. When Zélie arrived Cora went out at once and walked down the street in search of Mrs. Darrell.

She found her in the library changing some books. Cora chose some also, and then asked if Mrs. Darrell would not come back with her, and rest, and have some tea.

Maud said she would, and the two walked back together.

Just as they came up to the Gate House they met Noel Vanstone.

“I hope your head is better, Cora,” he said, as he stopped and shook hands with them both; “I was sorry to hear you were not well when I called this morning.”

“Yes, it is better, thank you. I was sorry

not to see you, Noel. Come in this evening and have a chat with us."

"Yes, I will," replied Noel, and as he spoke he gave a meaningful glance at Mrs. Darrell.

Cora saw the look, and although she did not, of course, understand its meaning, it aggravated her to see any sort of apparent understanding between them.

Noel walked on, and Cora and Mrs. Darrell entered Sker House.

"Come into the dining-room, will you," said Cora, "I think aunt is asleep upstairs. How dreadfully hot it has been to-day. I will ring for some tea. Bring tea, Zélie," she said, to the French maid who answered the bell.

"Are you going to the ball the day after to-morrow, Miss Stanley?" asked Maud.

"Yes, I think I shall," replied Cora. "And I wanted to ask you if you would

take a stall at the bazaar we are getting up for the infirmary. We are all to be dressed in Welsh costume. I think it will be rather amusing."

"Thank you; yes, I should like it very much," replied Cora, thinking to herself, "She will never be able to come after taking this stuff," and Cora shivered with a great terror, and almost remorse, for Maud looked so lovely in her white summer dress and pale blue ribbons, and Cora knew that before many minutes were over she would have unconsciously drunk what would mar that beauty for many a long day, and make her horrible to look at.

Zélie brought the tea in.

"Put it down on this table, Zélie," said Cora, in rather a hoarse voice.

"Yes, Mademoiselle. Would Mademoiselle wish that I should pour it out?"

“ Yes, you can do so.”

Zélie poured slowly and carefully the tea into the cup with the pink handle, put some sugar in it, and standing for a moment with her back to Mrs. Darrell, stirred it a little with the spoon, then with a graceful little curtsey handed it to her. Maud took it from her hand.

“ It is almost too hot to drink yet, I think, Zélie,” she said, and put it on the table by her side.

Zélie poured out another cup, but this she did not stop to stir, but handed it at once to Cora, whose face was as white as a sheet.

“ Mademoiselle, it will do your head good,” said she, with a look of caution at Cora.

With a trembling hand Cora took the cup, and put it down by her. For her life she could not have swallowed a drop ; her throat

felt parched, and her heart beat to suffocation.

“If only Mrs. Darrell would drink it, and put an end to the suspense,” she thought.

“Zélie, fetch me my fan off that table,” she said, speaking with some difficulty.

She was anxious to find some excuse for keeping the maid in the room.

As Zélie returned with the fan, Maud raised the cup to her lips; as she did so, Cora suddenly started to her feet, caught hold of the cup, and said—

“Zélie, you have given Mrs. Darrell the cup that runs out; it will spoil her dress.”

She took it away so hastily that the cup turned over, and the contents fell on the carpet, and also partly on Cora’s own dress.

“I beg your pardon, Mrs. Darrell, but this cup is cracked, and I was afraid the tea would spoil that lovely white dress of

yours. Zélie, give Mrs. Darrell my tea; I have not touched it yet," but Zélie was busy wiping up the tea on the floor with her pocket handkerchief, her face red, her eyes flashing while she muttered something to herself in French.

So Cora brought Mrs. Darrell her tea, and ordered Zélie sharply to fetch another cup at once.

As soon as the maid had left the room, Cora said—

"I am afraid I startled you; I am in such a nervous state to-day, that I scarcely know what I am doing. I did not sleep last night. I think there must be thunder about; it always makes me feel hysterical, and gives me a headache. It was very careless of Zélie to give you that cup. I must have it broken, and then there will be no fear of its being used again."

“ It was very good of you to think of it, Miss Stanley ; but I am afraid it has spoilt your dress. Zélie wiped up the carpet, but she did not seem to think of your dress.”

“ Oh ! it is black, it will not show ; it is only tea,” said Cora flushing hotly.

“ I am sure, Miss Stanley, that you ought to lie down and rest. I will go now. You will take a stall at the bazaar, will you not ? I can depend upon you ? ”

“ Yes, I should like it. Are we to wear tall beaver hats ? ”

“ Well, some of us will, but not all. It will not do for us to look all alike.”

“ What stall are you going to keep, Mrs. Darrell ? ”

“ My stall will be the refreshments, but I am going to dress as a Langum fisher-woman, and carry about a fish basket on my back full of small things for sale.”

“ You will do very well,” said Cora laughing.

The relief she felt at having knocked that cup over had made her feel another creature, and as Maud left the house, Cora said to herself—

“ I am so glad she did not drink it, come what may.”

“ Ah ! Mademoiselle ! ” exclaimed Zélie coming into the room. “ How could you do it ; I have no more, and we cannot get it in England, I fear. You will be sorry, I am very sure, soon, that you did not let her take it. But Mademoiselle must not forget that I did my best. It is not my fault now if Monsieur marries Mrs. Darrell.”

“ How much is it that you expect me to give you for doing this, Zélie ? ”

“ One hundred pounds, Mademoiselle, and it is very little, for there was some risk in it.”

“Nonsense, Zélie, I shall not give you as much as that. How can I tell that even if she had taken it, the stuff would have the effect you told me it would ? I will give you fifty pounds, not a penny more.”

“But if it had succeeded, Mademoiselle would have paid me well, and it is not my fault. Next time Mademoiselle wants me to help her she must then pay me first.”

“But you say you cannot do this again, Zélie?”

“No ; but there may be some other way I may think of if Mademoiselle wishes.”

“Zélie, I cannot ask Mrs. Darrell here and give her that stuff, or anything like it again ; I suffered tortures all the while you were preparing it, and giving it to her.”

“Well, I will think of some other plan ; we will see. If Madame Darrell should be

disfigured in any way, would Mademoiselle give me three hundred pounds?"

"If you can do so without any fear of its being of any serious consequence to her, excepting for the moment; but, Zélie, you must be sure of this."

"Well, Mademoiselle, I have an idea, but I must think a little, then I will tell the thing that I have imagined to Mademoiselle. Now to lie down and rest. Madame Lester is in her room. Let Mademoiselle try to sleep, and trouble no more. Myself, I will arrange it all."

"But you must do nothing without telling me. I must have time to think; you understand, Zélie?"

"But—yes, Mademoiselle, perfectly."

"It seems so cruel; if only we could get her to go away instead."

“But she will not do that; she loves him, Mademoiselle.”

“How do you know that, Zélie?”

“I have seen her meet him, and speak to him; I have eyes. I am very sure that she loves him.”

“And he?”

“Mademoiselle, it is her beauty that enslaves him; take that away, and it is Mademoiselle that he will marry. I am quite sure of that.”

Cora sighed; she was not so sure, and she knew not what to do. She hated Maud, and yet to deliberately and wilfully disfigure her was horrible. No thought of doing such a thing would ever have entered her head, if it had not been for that wicked little French maid, who, to gain her own ends to get money, tempted her with these horrible designs.



CHAPTER XXII.

MRS. DARRELL had scarcely walked a dozen yards from the door of Sker House when she was startled by a loud peal of thunder, and then some big drops of rain fell on the pavement in front of her. She quickened her steps, and turning round by the Gate House took the shortest way by the city walls to Breezelands. A flash of lightning and another loud crash of thunder made her start off in a run.

“Mrs. Darrell,” called out a man’s voice behind her, “if you run like that, I shall never catch you. I have brought you an umbrella.”

Maud turned; there was Noel Vanstone just behind her laughing, and holding towards

her a large silk umbrella, which had arrived none too soon, for the rain was coming down in torrents.

“ Let me hold it, that you may take care of your dress,” said Noel. “ Now let us see which can run the fastest; I believe you will beat me.”

But Mrs. Darrell refused to run another yard, so they walked as sedately as it was possible to do, with the rain coming down in a deluge, and the lightning flashing round them.

“ Are you frightened ? ” said Noel as, just as they were passing under the old gateway, an unusually vivid flash almost blinded them, and Maud seized hold of his arm with a little cry.

“ Not much; but I cannot say I like being out in a thunderstorm. Come in until it is over, Mr. Vanstone.”

As she spoke the thunder pealed over their heads, and seemed to shake the house they were just entering. Maud looked rather white, but was very quiet.

Just as they reached the drawing-room there was another, but rather less vivid, flash, but the thunder did not follow so quickly.

“I think the worst is over,” said Noel, going over to the sofa on which Maud had sat down. “I do not wonder at your feeling a little nervous; it is a fearful storm. Is this your smelling bottle?” and Noel took the stopper out of a glass bottle that lay on a small table by the window, and held it towards Mrs. Darrell just as another flash lit up the whole room.

“Thank you, Mr. Vanstone. Yes,” then smiling at him, “I know you are thinking how foolish I am.”

“Indeed, I am not ;” and Noel sat down on the sofa by her, and, taking up her fan of peacock feathers, fanned her gently with it—the act reminding him of that day of the picnic, when she had been asleep on the old tower at Manorbeer.

“It is hot enough to make any one feel ill. It is to be hoped this storm will clear the air.”

“Mrs. Darrell, do you know this is not the first time I have fanned you ?”

“Why, when have you done it before ?” said Maud, looking up with surprise.

“Cannot you guess ?”

“At Manorbeer, I suppose,” she replied, with rising colour ; “but what could you have fanned me for then ? There was plenty of breeze on the tower.”

“Yes, and plenty of flies, too.”

“But you were not fanning me when I awoke ?”

“No, I had been diverted from that interesting occupation by some women passing underneath. I thought when I first heard their voices it was our party returning from the sands.”

“Then you returned before the others?”

“Oh, yes!”

“And why, when you found I was asleep, did you not go back to them? It was too bad to stop and laugh at me. You might have woke me, at any rate.”

“I had half a mind to do that, but I was not quite sure if you would like it. You might not have been of the same opinion as the young lady in the poem, you know.”

Noel held the fan aside as he said this, and leant down, until his eyes, which were brimful of merriment, were on a level with Mrs. Darrell’s.

“Now that I know that you would prefer to be awoke”—

“Mr. Vanstone,” broke in Maud, rising and forgetting all about the thunderstorm, “you had better go away if you can only talk such nonsense. I am not accustomed to have such things said to me.”

“I beg your pardon if I have said anything to offend you,” said Noel, gravely, but with his eyes still betraying his amusement.

“You are not a bit sorry,” said Maud, turning away from him.

“Nor are you a bit angry,” replied Noel, placing himself so that she was bound to look at him. “You know I did not mean to be impertinent. I was only joking, to make you forget the storm, in which I have succeeded.” Then speaking lower, and taking Maud’s hand in his, he added—“Surely you must

know, Mrs. Darrell, that I would not say anything I thought would really annoy you."

"No, I do not think you would. Don't say anything more about it, Mr. Vanstone;" and Maud raised her eyes for a moment and looked into his face. Those lovely eyes of hers told more than she was aware of, most likely; for there came a look into Noel's, as she raised hers, that made the rich colour spread over her face and dye her very throat.

"I wonder how mother has been in this storm," she said, quickly, and went across the room to ring the bell. Noel, however, reached it first—"Why did you not ask me, Mrs. Darrell? The storm is over now. I will say 'goodbye.' I am to see Cora this evening, and I mean to explain everything to her."

"I do not think she seems at all well

to-day, Mr. Vanstone. The heat seems to have upset every one. Had you not better leave your explanation until to-morrow?"

" You appear to think what I am going to say to Cora will distress her."

" I do not think she at all understands what your ideas are on the subject, and I fancy she will be surprised and annoyed ; but nothing she has ever said leads me to think this, Mr. Vanstone."

" I think you are mistaken. I shall call at Sker House this evening, as I promised ; but if Cora does not seem well, I will not mention the subject to-night."

" I wonder why they do not answer the bell. Will you ring again, please, Mr. Vanstone ?"

Noel rang again, and in a moment a servant came in and said they had all been upstairs with Mrs. St. Clare, who had been very frightened and ill with the storm.

“Oh, poor mother! I ought to have gone and seen how she was before,” said Maud. “Goodbye, Mr. Vanstone. I suppose you will be at the ball?”

“Yes, of course I shall. May I have a valse with you, Mrs. Darrell?”

“I never promise dances until the night of the ball, Mr. Vanstone,” replied Maud, laughing, as she went up to her mother’s room.

When Noel went out into the street he found that the storm had quite blown over, and the sun had come out again; so he turned on to the Esplanade, and the first person he saw was Captain Kingsgate walking towards him.

“Why, where have you been in this storm, Vanstone!”

“I have been at Breezelands.”

“Oh! that’s where you have been, is it?”

Noel walked back with Captain Kingsgate,

who for a few minutes remained unusually silent. At last he said—"I say, Vanstone, I hope you won't think me impertinent; but don't you think you are playing rather a dangerous game with that fascinating widow?"

"Why dangerous, Kingsgate?"

"Well, not very long ago you told me you had given up some girl you were fond of, because you did not think you ought to marry now, and deprive your Cousin Cora of her money. And now you are paying marked attention to this beautiful Mrs. Darrell. Of course you know your own business best; but Mrs. Darrell is not a woman to be trifled with."

"Mrs. Darrell knows all about it."

"Oh! does she? And does she agree with you that you ought not to marry?"

"I really cannot tell you what she thinks."

“ Is she of the same mind as most of us are, that the wisest thing you could do would be to marry your cousin ? ”

“ I have just told you, Kingsgate, that I cannot tell you what she thinks.”

“ I did not understand the meaning of that answer. I thought you meant you did not know yourself what her opinion was.”

“ I know exactly what her opinion is.”

“ Then there is nothing more to be said—by me, at any rate.”

“ What do you mean by saying ‘ no more by me,’ Kingsgate ? Who else are you thinking of ? Please speak plainly.”

“ I think your cousin may have something to say about it.”

“ Why ? ”

“ I am sure that she expects you to ask her to marry her.”

“ I intend to explain all my feelings about

the affair to her, so that there can be no misunderstanding."

"It is a pity you did not do that at first, I think, Vanstone."

"Yes, but I did not think it necessary until—until the last few days."

"Oh! perhaps Mrs. Darrell suggested the advisability," said Captain Kingsgate.

"Why should you think that?"

"Do you intend to tell Miss Stanley that you are going to remain single all your life, in order that she may not be deprived of her £5,000 a year?"

"No, I shall not promise her that."

"Oh! now I am beginning to see daylight," said the Captain, laughing.

"Really, Kingsgate," began Noel.

"Don't trouble yourself to explain," interrupted Kingsgate, still smiling. "It's a case of two to one on Tristam now; that's all."

“It’s nothing of the sort.”

“We shall see. Here’s Hetty Lane in a wondrous Newmarket get-up. Where is she off to, I wonder?”

“Captain Kingsgate,” said Miss Lane, “I am going to the library to get a book for your wife. Will you come and take it back to her for me?”

Captain Kingsgate went back to the library, Noel walking on towards the hotel in rather a bewildered frame of mind. All at once every one seemed to think he was behaving ill to Cora. What had he done? How could he have imagined that it would have been looked upon as such a likely thing he should marry her, and that she should think so herself?

One thing, however, was very clear to his mind—that was, that he must lose no time in coming to an understanding with Cora herself about it all.



CHAPTER XXIII.

WHEN Noel Vanstone called at Sker House, in the evening, he found Mrs. Lester had been so ill with the storm that afternoon that she had gone to bed, and so Cora was all alone in the drawing-room, which, as he desired to have his little explanation with her, was a fortunate circumstance.

She was very glad to see him, evidently, and said her head was much better.

Noel told her that he had only just been in time to shelter Mrs. Darrell from the rain.

“So he was after her again,” thought Cora.

“Are you going to the ball on Thursday night, Cora?”

“Yes, I shall go. I do not see why I should not. It is two months now since uncle’s death.”

“Yes, you had better go ; and talking of uncle’s death, I think it would be as well if you and I had a little talk over that extraordinary will he left. I think we understand one another, and that you doubtless feel as I do ; that, only having a cousinly liking for one another, it would not be what we should wish to carry out the conditions by which alone I could come into the property that belonged to Uncle John.”

Cora had during the whole of this speech kept her face averted—as he ceased speaking she said, still keeping her face turned away,

“So you wish me to understand, Noel, that you do not care to carry out my uncle’s wishes, or that you think I should not be willing.”

“ Both, Cora.”

“ Then let me tell you, Cousin Noel, that I think you ought to have told me this before.”

Cora turned a flushed indignant face to him as she spoke, and Noel began to see that this little explanation would be by no means so easy as he had expected.

“ I am sorry,” he began, but Cora interrupted him.

“ Sorry, I should think so, for two months every one has looked upon it as a matter of course that you would”—Cora hesitated.

“ Marry you,” put in Noel, generously relieving her from her difficulty.

“ Yes. Aunt Maria has said often, that she thought you were behaving very badly to neglect me so, and never mention the subject, but we neither of us ever for a moment expected this was what you meant.”

“ Do you mean to say, Cora, that you and

Mrs. Lester have taken it for granted, that I meant to marry you ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Forgive me Corrie, but it is best we should quite understand each other, you would have been willing to marry me ? ”

“ Put in such a way, that is a very awkward question for me to answer, Noel.”

“ Were you aware before my uncle’s death that he wished me to marry you, Cora ? ”

“ Yes.”

“ Did you tell him you were willing to do so ? ”

“ I did not say I should be unwilling.”

“ I wish he had told me that.”

“ Why ? ” said Cora quickly.

“ Because then I should have spoken to you at once—as it was, I thought my doing so would only be awkward, and unpleasant for you, but I see now that I was wrong, I

am afraid I was thinking so much of the trouble the will brought on myself, that I did not sufficiently consider you in the matter."

"What trouble did it bring on you," exclaimed Cora in surprise.

"At that time I had thought of marrying, and I gave up the idea because I felt I could not deprive you of your income."

Quick as lightning the thought flashed through Cora's mind,

"Then he will not marry Mrs. Darrell."

"Do you mean, Noel, that you do not intend ever to marry at all, if you do not marry me?"

Noel saw that he had made a mistake in telling her this.

"I thought so then."

"And you do not think so now," exclaimed Cora starting up and turning round on him with a sudden flash of anger, that quite startled him.

“I think that it is possible, that circumstances might arise which would hardly justify my remaining unmarried for such a reason ! ”

“Which means in so many plain words, that just after my uncle’s death, you gave up marrying some girl intending fully to marry me, and come into all the property, but that since then you have seen some one, you have fallen desperately in love with, and have determined, as you have never directly asked me to marry you, to get out of your difficulty by pretending you never had any intention of carrying out my uncle’s wishes, and it is a mean, cowardly thing to do, and what I should never have given you credit for, Noel.”

“Cora,” said Noel coming up to where she was standing, and looking her straight in the face, “you are wrong, before my uncle signed that will, he asked me if I would promise to

marry you, and said, "if so he would leave me all his money." I refused. If you will ask Mr. Brandon he will tell you that this is true, and also that within five minutes of the time when he finished reading the will, I had said that I should never marry my Cousin Cora. It is a matter of great regret to me that uncle should have left his money in the way he has, but I cannot think that it would be for your happiness, that you should marry me without any warmer feeling than cousinly liking, just because you would keep the money."

"Noel, it is no use talking like that," said Cora, who had sat down again and was sobbing bitterly, "you are behaving very unkindly to me and you have made me wretchedly unhappy."

Noel went up to her and gently laid his hand on her shoulder.

"Some day, Cora, you will really care for

some one, and he will love you, and then you will be glad that you did not marry me."

" You forget if I marry I shall lose all my money."

" But money is not everything."

" It is all very well for you to say that, who have a good income, that cannot be taken from you, but I am to live in the constant fear that this income of mine will be taken from me, and besides I do care for you very much, Noel."

" Corrie, I cannot think that you love me, you had made up your mind to marry me, and it is natural therefore that you should have thought you entertained a feeling of affection for me, but I cannot help thinking, that if you knew that your money would be yours always, you would not care a pin about my not marrying you, it's this dreadful money that is at the bottom of it all, I wish

I could see a way to put that right, but I can't; if only the money came to me in the event of your marrying, the thing could be easily settled, as I could manage to give it you all back again, but my income is much smaller than yours, so that is out of my power, seeing that my uncle's money cannot under any circumstances come to me."

"There is one way in which it might."

Noel was silent.

"I daresay it seems to you very strange I should think and speak as I do," said Cora after a few minutes' silence, "but you must remember, that this has been a settled thing in my mind for some time, and all these feelings of yours have been quite unknown to me, Noel."

"I am very, very sorry, Cora, that I have not spoken to you on this subject before, I

quite admit that I have been to blame for not doing so, and I hope you will forgive me for the trouble and unpleasantness I have caused you. Would you wish me to speak to Mrs. Lester about this or would you rather do so yourself?"

"I will tell her," replied Cora.

"And now I will say good-night, will you shake hands with me, Corrie, will you forgive me?"

Cora put out her hand, and said rather shortly and without looking at him,

"Good-night."

As soon as he was gone Cora rang the bell. Zélie appeared almost directly.

"Zélie, what is it you have thought of to disfigure Mrs. Darrell. My cousin has said that he does not intend to marry me, but I feel almost sure that if it were not for Mrs. Darrell he would do so."

“I knew that Mademoiselle would be sorry she had prevented the taking of the powder.”

“Well, what can be done now, Zélie?”

“We can give Madame Darrell the little pox.”

“What? the small-pox do you mean?”

“Yes, I had a letter from my brother in London this morning, telling me that my sister Marie had the small-pox.”

Cora started and shrank back from Zélie.

“Oh! do not have fear, my brother has not been near Marie, but my mother is nursing her, and for a little present, would send a letter to Mrs. Darrell that has been in Marie’s hands, or some stuff she has handled, this will give Mrs. Darrell the small-pox and you will not see it done,” added the maid smiling.

“But Zélie it is so horrible, and might it not kill her.”

“But no, Mademoiselle, people do not die of the small-pox now.”

“If she has been vaccinated she will not take it perhaps.”

Zélie shrugged her shoulders.

“We can but try as you say, Mademoiselle, she *may* not take it.”

“Well Zélie, say nothing more to me, I cannot bear to talk or think about it.”

“If Mademoiselle will give the money she promised, it shall be done without a word, and Mademoiselle will have nothing to do with it, she will know nothing, it is all me.”

“I have only one hundred in the house, you shall have the rest to-morrow, Zélie, but remember not another word.”

“Very sure, Mademoiselle, I go to write.”

“I said not another word,” exclaimed Cora
“what have *I* to do with your letters.”

“Very true, nothing at all, I ask pardon
of Mademoiselle, I go to send this that
Mademoiselle has kindly given me to pay the
expenses of the illness of my sister.”





CHAPTER XXIV.

Twas the night of the assembly ball, and Noel and several other gentlemen were standing near the door leading into the ball-room waiting for the ladies to arrive, Noel had not seen either Mrs. Darrell or Cora since the day of the thunder storm, as he had gone to Pembroke Dock the day after, and had been for a fishing excursion with Captain Kingsgate on that day, only getting back just in time to have dinner, and dress for the ball.

He had found a letter waiting for him from his friend Frank Vaughan, Mabel's brother, which amongst other chat informed him that

his sister was just engaged to Mr. Lloyd his father's curate.

"So that's at an end, and most likely she would not have had me if I had asked her. What a conceited fool I was," thought Noel, as he put the letter back into the envelope, and sat down to his dinner.

Noel was looking out for his cousin and Mrs. Lester, as he stood at the ball-room door, thinking they would like to have a gentleman to go into the room with them. Presently he saw them coming, Cora, with a very pretty black net dress and jet ornaments, looked very well, and greeted him with a smile.

Noel found them a comfortable seat at the top of the room, and engaged Cora for a galop, then went back to the door again to watch for Mrs. Darrell, but the lancers,

which opened the ball, began before she arrived.

Noel however did not dance, and presently he saw Mrs. Darrell come in with another lady, and two gentlemen, who were strangers to him. She wore a white dress, covered with small gold stars, a gold band on her hair, and gold ornaments.

He crossed over the room, and went up to her at once.

“Mrs. Darrell it is the night of the ball now,” he said, looking at her and smiling.

Her only reply was to pass her programme to him, as she did so, Noel saw a look of surprise come into the face of the gentleman who was standing by her, Noel wrote his name down once, twice, three times, and then returned the card which Mrs. Darrell looked at.

“Is it the fashion in the part of the world

you come from, Mr. Vanstone, to dance three times with a lady in one evening." She spoke in a low voice, and with her eyes on the card.

"Yes, we very often dance three or four times with one lady," said Noel, boldly.
"Don't you do so here?"

"I don't."

"I assure you it is an excellent plan, one gets accustomed to one another's steps, it is much better than constantly changing partners."

"But I do not know how you dance, I hate being dragged about, and I very rarely dance round dances," continued Maud..

"That's another way of looking at it, let us try this valse and see how we can get on together."

"I am sure you valse well, or you would not dare to say that, Mr. Vanstone."

Noel smiled.

“ If I drag you about, or get that exquisite dress of yours torn, I myself will scratch my name off your card,” he said.

“ Do you like my dress ? ”

“ It is a lovely dress, so lovely that it is almost a pity that you should wear it.”

“ Why ? ”

“ I must not tell you, because you do not like compliments paid you.”

“ But this must be a very far-fetched one.”

“ Not at all, it is a pity some one should not wear it, who needs to be made look lovelier, than nature has already made them.”

“ Mr. Vanstone where have you learnt the art of paying compliments like that ? ”

“ In the palace of truth, Mrs. Darrell.”

Maud laughed.

“ I shall be obliged to valse with you, in

order to stop your talking such nonsense, Mr. Vanstone."

"By all means, come down to the other end of the room, the band will strike up directly."

Noel was a good dancer, and Maud valed to perfection, and they were watched by many admiring eyes. When at last they stopped, after having had two or three turns, Noel said—

"I have not tired you, I hope?"

"No, it is only bad dancers that tire one."

"Thank you, Mrs. Darrell, you appear to know how to pay compliments."

"I have learnt the lesson from you, perhaps."

Noel laughed.

The dance over they went into the refreshment room, Noel found Maud a seat in a quiet corner, and taking up her fan, said—

“Let me fan you, this room is dreadfully hot.”

What was there in such a natural observation, to bring that sudden flush into Maud’s face.

“Thank you, I can fan myself, you need not trouble,” she replied, taking the fan out of his hand.

At this moment Captain Kingsgate came up, to ask Mrs. Darrell to give him a dance, she put his name down on her programme, and he departed again.

“Was it for this next dance?” said Noel.

“No.”

“Are you engaged for this?”

“No, I do not care for galops much.”

“I am engaged to my cousin for one, let me see, is it this? No, the next, then will you stay here and rest, it will be cooler when

they are all gone into the ball-room, and I will open that window."

Maud did not reply, but she sat still after the refreshment room was deserted by the dancers.

"There now, one can breathe," said Noel, after getting one of the waiters to open a window near them. "I have had a long talk with Cora, Mrs. Darrell."

"I am glad of that."

"I think we quite understand each other now, and I have made no promise. I ought to have spoken before; I see now that my not having done so placed her in an awkward position."

"Yes, it did, every one but you saw that," said Maud, smiling.

"It was very kind of you to open my eyes, Mrs. Darrell, I am very much obliged to you for it. There is something else I want to

tell you," continued Noel, after a minute's silence. "I had a letter this evening telling me that Mabel Vaughan is engaged to be married."

"Who is Mabel Vaughan?"

"I forgot I had not told you her name," said Noel, looking at Maud and smiling.

"Is it the girl you had thought of marrying?"

"Yes."

"She has not suffered by your giving her up then?"

"I never thought she would, but I think now that most likely she cared for this young man when I was down there, and that under any circumstances she would have refused me."

"Then you have been spared that mortification."

"Just so," said Noel, laughing.

“I wonder how many times you have had no said to you, Mr. Vanstone.”

“As many times as I have asked,” replied Noel, laughing.

“How very unpleasant.”

“Very, I have made up my mind I will not try again, until I feel quite sure of getting a different answer,” and Noel looked down into Mrs. Darrell’s eyes as he spoke, in a way that made Maud raise her fan so as to hide her face.

But she said quite calmly—

“A very wise resolution, only as a rule men are so conceited that they are apt to make mistakes.”

“I am afraid I am very conceited, Mrs. Darrell.”

“I did not say that,” replied Maud, laughing, “but if the cap fits, by all means put it on.”

At this moment the dancers came back, and Noel offered Mrs. Darrell his arm, and they went back into the ball-room.

Maud returned to her friends, and Noel went to look for partners.

Cora was very pleasant and very gracious to Noel when they had their dance together, and he was so attentive to her that the lookers-on were divided in their opinions as to which was the favourite—Mrs. Darrell or his cousin.

Major Dennis thought he was “only flirting with Mrs. Darrell, but would go in for the cousin and her money after a bit.” Captain Kingsgate was of a different opinion.

“Tristam, is there good shooting at Fryers-dale Hall?” he asked, as he saw Noel and Mrs. Darrell start for their third valse.

Jack Tristam made no answer, but he got very red, and looked very uncomfortable.

Cora was looking remarkably well that night, and seemed in an unusually good humour ; even the marked attention that Noel paid to Mrs. Darrell did not seem to put her out. She was a good dancer, and had plenty of partners and attention, and Noel danced three times with her.

As Noel put Mrs. Darrell into her carriage he said—" You have not told me if you approve of the plan of dancing three times with the same partner."

" I think it is not bad, Mr. Vanstone ; but you must not look upon it as a rule of mine, and expect me to do the same thing again."

" Oh, well ! I must take my chance. Good-night ! "

As he went back into the ball-room he met Captain Kingsgate.

" Well, Vanstone, I hope you've enjoyed the ball," he said, laughing. " You've set everybody talking, at any rate."

“ How so ? ”

“ No one ever saw Mrs. Darrell dance three valses with one gentleman before.”

“ If my doing so has set people talking about her, I am very sorry I have done it,” replied Noel, hotly.

“ Oh ! we must mind our P’s and Q’s I see. All right, old fellow. I’ll set it right. You danced the same number of times with Miss Stanley, did you not ? ”

“ I daresay,” replied Noel—an answer that sent Captain Kingsgate into a fit of laughter.

“ Come and have some supper, Vanstone,” he said. “ The ladies are all gone, and I am as hungry as a hunter.”

END OF VOL. I.

